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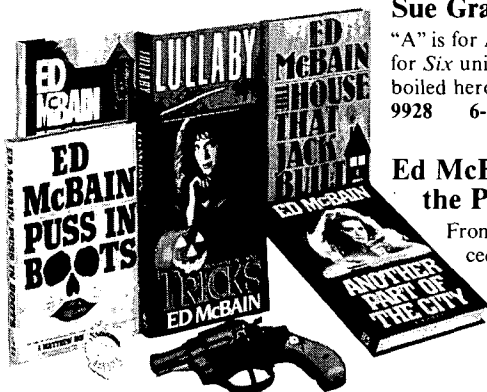
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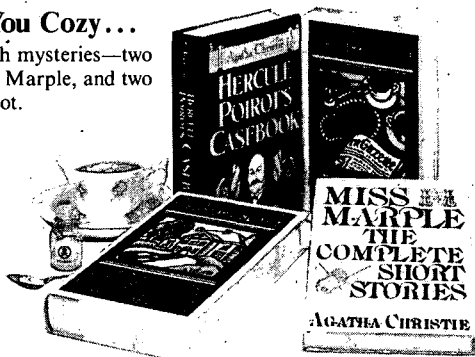
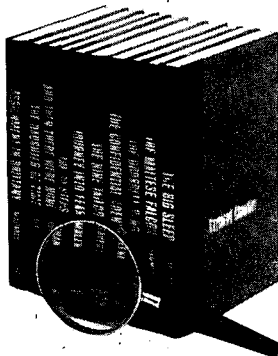
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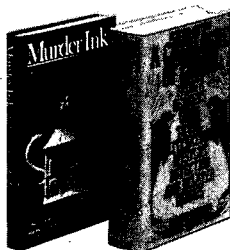
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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

**E**dgar Week comes earlier than usual this year. Ordinarily held in May, the 1990 celebration is scheduled for the end of April (but in New York City, as always). Anyone who wants to attend, therefore, should give thought to it right away—the deadline for reservations is April 13.

The main event, of course, is the annual Edgar Allan Poe Awards Dinner, a banquet attended by about eight hundred people involved in the mystery field—writers, editors, agents, and so on, and of course friends, guests, and fans. There the Edgars are announced and awarded, those coveted little ceramic busts of Poe that proclaim, in the judgment of the Mystery Writers of America, the best work in the genre for the preceding year. Certificates

of nomination are given to runners-up, and black ceramic Ravens are often given for special work in the genre.

This year the MWA are particularly honoring Dame Agatha Christie and Georges Simenon (the latter died in 1989).

Besides the dinner, there will be a day-long series of panel discussions, among published writers and other professionals, on Christie, the writing of fiction and nonfiction based on true crime, forensic pathology today, the short story, and "Suspense, Atmosphere, Action: Essentials of Mystery Fiction." That will be followed by a cocktail party, the presentation of the Robert L. Fish Award for the best first mystery short story of the year, and an auc-

*(continued on page 83)*

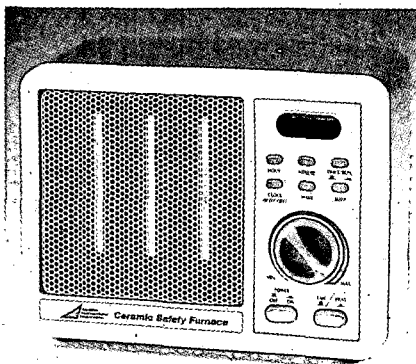
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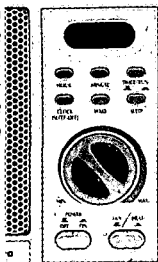
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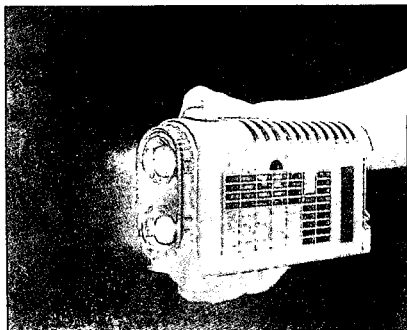
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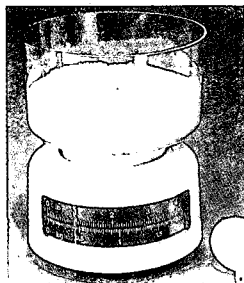


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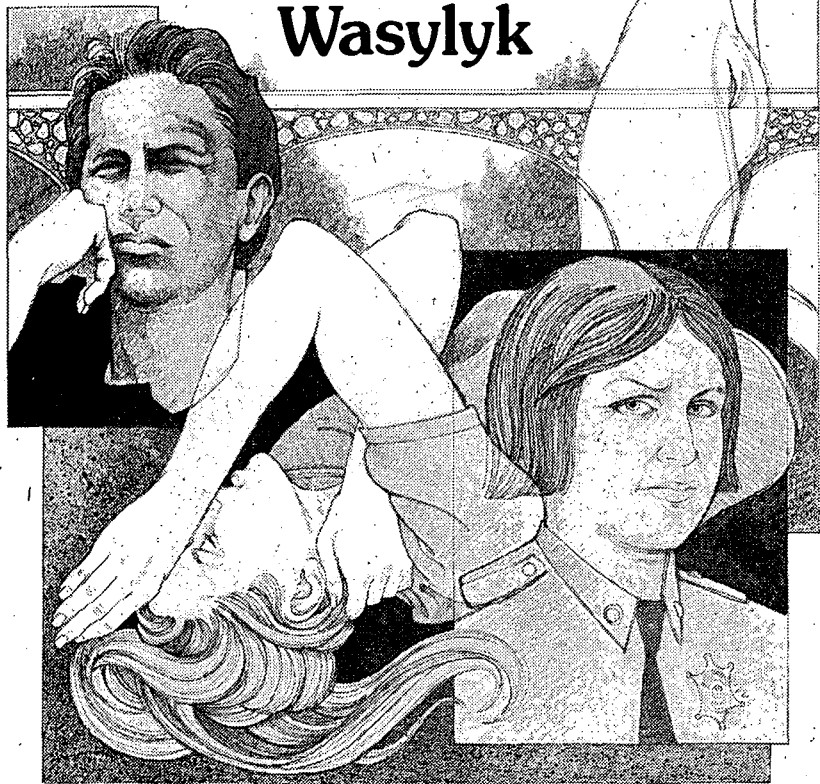
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# —Hard Evidence—

by Stephen  
Wasylyk



**T**he main room of Klau-der's cabin took possession of the lake view and the often beautiful sunsets over the mountains, leaving for the kitchen window only the weed-filled clearing and the short

gravel driveway that separated the cabin from the road, and on this mid-September morning Meg Boniface stepping from the black and white patrol car and leaving ragged footprints in the sheen of the morning dew

as she headed for his back door, marching, rather than walking, like a grand marshall leading an invisible parade in support of law and order, imposing size and girth enhanced by the loose-fitting sheriff's tans, the badge gleaming on her sloping breast.

Wondering what she wanted, Klauder put away his one breakfast dish—along with the thought that switching to paper plates and foam cups, uncivilized as that might be, would end dishwashing forever, a chore he found so loathsome he often considered starving—and met her at the door.

Even hatless, she seemed to loom above him, the do-it-yourself hairstyle parted in the center, the dark brown hair winged above the high forehead and falling uncurled and unwaved to a ruler-straight line just below her ears, too short for a broad face composed of slopes and angles.

"Morning," he said.

The impression he'd cultivated that he preferred solitude to neighborly friendliness brought a hesitation to her question.

"Mind if I come in, Klauder?"

He pushed the screen door wide. "Coffee?"

"That would be nice." Her voice was as pillow soft and velvety as the Junoesque body, which led people who didn't

know better into not taking the badge seriously.

He filled two cups and rinsed out the carafe, thinking of the chuckles at the town garage last week over the destruction of an expensive sixteen-valve engine in a Jaguar. In the process of accumulating the symbols of worldly wealth—like the Jaguar, the handmade Italian loafers, designer emblazoned jeans and shirt, and his hundred-dollar-a-shot hair styling—a Rolex-wearing arbitrager hadn't acquired enough sense not to call the officer who stopped him for speeding a fat old broad, tell her what she could do with her citation, and climb behind the wheel to drive away.

Meg had walked to the front of the Jaguar and put a .357 Magnum slug into the engine as though putting a broken-legged horse out of its misery, cuffed the now tractable arbitrager, and thrown him into jail where he still resided.

A Timex-wearing judge not only gave him thirty days but threw in a stern lecture emphasizing that no matter how big a man thinks he is on his own turf, he walks softly on someone else's even if, in his smokeless world of aerobics, working out, fitness centers, natural foods, and daily doses of oat bran, she could indeed be termed a fat old broad, and furthermore, he was extremely fortun-



ate the Supreme Court considered a blood test and urinalysis an invasion of privacy because the judge was certain there was something in both which would have earned the arbitrator far more than thirty days.

She declined both sugar and cream as they sat at the kitchen table measuring each other. Her hazel eyes swept the kitchen once, pausing only at the scanner on the countertop, its green light rippling across the face in perpetual motion.

"You've been here how long, a year?"

He nodded. "Almost."

"Stay pretty much to yourself."

"Better than meddling in other people's business."

She tested the coffee with a dainty sip. "Ever hear how I got this job?"

"Never asked."

"Heart attack took Merle with only a year to go on his term, so the commissioners appointed me to finish it off. Sort of a widow's mite, you might say. Expected me to sit back and wait it out, but I don't take money for doing nothing. Hell, I knew as much as he did about the job and saw no reason I couldn't do as well. Voters must have agreed. They've elected me twice since."

The coffee had steamed for a half hour too long. He could feel

it etching his tooth enamel.

He wondered why she felt he needed an explanation. "I've never heard any complaints."

"Never came across anything I couldn't handle before."

The broad face held all the animation of a good poker player with nothing in his hand betting into a pair of aces showing.

"Does that mean you have?"

She finished the coffee and pushed the cup aside. "Not bad, Klauder. Nice and strong, the way I like it. Saw you having a beer with Majorski the other day, so I asked him why a statie on the investigative unit should know you. For all I knew, he'd put you away at one time. He found that very funny. Said he'd worked with you when you were a lieutenant in Central Homicide in Philadelphia. Took early retirement when you stepped on a few political toes and they wanted to ship you down to a division. Said you were one of the best. Did he tell you why he was here?"

"Looking into the kid jumping off the bridge."

"Cindy Weatherall. Pretty seventeen-year-old." She indicated the scanner. "You heard it?"

He nodded. From the start of the search to the end, when the voices overrode each other with shock and concern until the words *she's dead* subdued them all.

"I couldn't see it as a suicide, so I called him in. No basis, he said."

*If it wasn't a suicide, said Majorski, they blew it. They were so anxious when they found her, they never thought about preserving the integrity of the scene and the body.*

"Coroner found no trauma inconsistent with a fifty foot fall to sharp rocks. No alcohol or drugs in the blood. Just another teenage suicide. Out of the blue. No signs. No indications. Only thing out of the ordinary was the kid was two months pregnant and that was probably the motive."

She rose, leaving the statement hanging there. "What do you do out here anyway, Klauder? Except fish, I mean. I've seen you out on the lake. A man can't spend all his time fishing."

He motioned her to follow.

He'd converted the living room with the magnificent view into a workshop, his bench overlooking the lake. Below, his rickety pier pointed toward the tufted carpet of evergreens rising steeply from the far shore, his rowboat at the end turned upside down like a gray turtle.

Roughly finished but still showing flair and style, a pair of duck decoys rested at the end of the bench, while three heads, waiting for bodies, sat lined up as if in a shooting gallery.

"They bring in walking-around money. A friend who puts out a sportsman's catalogue buys all I can make. I don't work hard at it." He didn't tell her that working with his hands allowed his mind to move around his life and wonder why he had so many failures and so few successes.

She ran an index finger down a duck's back while her mind scooted off in another direction like a water bug.

"I don't read you as either gay or the bachelor type. Divorced?"

"No. We were till death us do part people. It did. If you're through with my personal life—"

"Always like to know who I'm talking to."

"—you said you couldn't see it as a suicide."

She smiled suddenly, her teeth surprisingly white and even, ten years gone from the face as slopes and angles softened.

"Take that whifty old broad look off your face, Klauder. I think the pregnancy was the motive, all right, but not for suicide, not with her and not in this day and age. I know the family. The father heads a road repair crew for the state, the mother works part time in a real estate office. Neither would have become hysterical if they'd known. Shaken up, yes, as they were when I told them. As the

girl would have been. None would have panicked. They'd have considered their options—

"They didn't know?"

"No, but only because she'd just found out for certain that same day. Maybe she didn't trust one of those drugstore kits. She'd gone to the family doctor. He tried the patient confidentiality routine until I pointed out the girl was dead, which to me was a greater obligation. He didn't ask who the father was, since it was none of his business, but he did say she took the news rather well. He told her he thought she should tell her parents but whatever she decided, she could count on him. That was at four, after school. From his office, she went to the McDonald's on the edge of town where she worked from five until nine, her usual shift."

She motioned toward the decoys. "Can you spare some time from your carving?"

He was tempted to say no. He didn't want to get involved and Majorski had said it was a no go, but she'd taken so long to get around to asking, he knew she wouldn't be here at all if she didn't feel she owed something to the dead girl.

When they're that young, we all do, he thought.

As they passed through the kitchen, she waved at the scanner. "Once a cop, always a cop, eh, Klauder?"

She had *that* right.

**H**er big hands on the wheel threw the car around the curves like a toy, which explained how she'd caught the speeding arbitrage. It would take an Indy veteran to outrace her on these roads.

She pulled off on an apron at the approach to a concrete and stone arch that spanned a crease between steeply rounded hills, the bridge a generous two lanes with flat, eighteen inch wide, waist-high cement parapets on either side that must have challenged every kid in the area from day one.

*I double dare you to walk it!*

Funnelled by the valley, the wind snarled their hair and pasted their clothes to their bodies when they walked out to look over the parapet. Below, the creek bed was perhaps a hundred feet wide, thick with rocks and boulders, while the creek, thinned by a dry summer, reflected the September sky like the scattered shards of a broken mirror, the trees sloping steeply to the banks.

"We found her purse and schoolbag here. No suicide note, Klauder, no please forgive me, Mom and Dad. She was down there on the rocks."

She stared upriver, the information recalled from a subdivision of her brain; the primary

part somewhere else considering Lord knows what.

"Did she meet a boyfriend after work?"

"No boyfriend. As far as the kids at the McDonald's know, she always went home alone. She'd been quiet that evening, but they said she always had been. She wasn't the giggly, airhead type. One said he saw her using the pay phone outside when he drove up before five."

She put her elbows on the parapet, hands clasped, not asking him but herself. "How did she get here?"

Down the road and around a bend and a mile away from the golden arches where she worked, the blacktop intersected the highway into town.

"Not too far to walk."

She rebutted that with a firm shake of her head. "One of my deputies crossed this bridge at nine thirty on his way into the office. He'd have noticed anyone walking along the road at night. When she didn't come home, Clyde Weatherall drove in to the McDonald's looking for her, figured something was wrong and came into the office about eleven. I guess your scanner told you we found the schoolbag and purse about two."

A car purred past, the driver's large, dark sunglasses turned to them like insect eyes.

"The coroner says the time of death was between midnight

and one, but internal hemorrhaging showed she had to be lying there for an hour or more before she died."

He'd heard the search begin between the girl's home and the McDonald's, which made sense, and widen later, but the trace of guilt in her voice showed she blamed herself for not searching in the right place soon enough.

"That's my side, Klauder. No one else agrees because they say there's nothing in the circumstances and the evidence to show differently. Majorski said to get him more to work with and he'd be back, but I think he figured he had more important things to worry about than a kid who jumped off a bridge. The coroner, well, it's not like a career with him, know what I mean? His job is to establish the cause and time of death. He doesn't really look for more. I had to push him into checking under her fingernails, figuring she'd have fought and scratched, but there was nothing there. Now, she could have been unconscious when she went over, but there's nothing to indicate how that could have been done, not with what those rocks did to her. And my deputies—they say I'm acting like a woman, not a police officer, that what I'm going on is woman's intuition. Well, maybe I am, or maybe I just don't want to think that

there's a son of a bitch out there thinking he got away with something. That's why I wanted your opinion. I've been sheriff for almost nine years and never run into anything like this before, so I'm no expert. The thing is, I have to release the body, so forget about your decoys for a minute, Klauder, and tell me what you'd do if you were me."

No matter what he said, she'd never accept the girl's death as suicide. Instinct? Gut feeling? Or did she feel the itching of a never completely healed, long buried scar from some similar betrayal—her own, or even her daughter's, now grown and gone like so many others from an area where opportunity was limited?

Immaterial. Any and all reasons translated into one. She'd never sleep peacefully again unless she took this as far as she could.

He slowly ran a hand over the weathered waist-high concrete, his fingers picking up a film of cement dust. Too much had been overlooked, too much time had been lost, but—

They were standing perhaps fifty yards from the end of the bridge, almost another hundred to the center. Even in the dark, the girl would have known she hadn't reached it, and if she intended to kill herself, she'd certainly have gone farther. Leapers who used bridges might

have lost their grasp on reality, but they were rational enough to want the longest possible fall, which was why they sometimes climbed the superstructure. On the other hand, if someone had tossed her over, it would have been done as quickly as possible. The time to go that extra hundred yards might have brought a passing car to the scene.

"Maybe she did leave a note," he said slowly, "and it wasn't noticed and was kicked aside. Maybe it went off the bridge with her somehow. It's a little late now, but have a couple of men scour the area around the bridge and up and down the stream. Send her clothes to the state police lab and have them analyzed for cement dust and fiber abrasion." He patted the parapet. "She had to climb up here. Did she sit and push off or did she stand and step off? Or did someone place her here and push her off? The same for her body. Does it have scratches as well as contusions? Make sure the coroner takes a blood sample from the fetus and send it to the lab for analysis. It could help establish paternity. I don't know if the phone company has the equipment, but see if they have a record of the number she called. Go back into her life two months ago when she got pregnant. Vacation time. Where did she go, what did she



do, who was she with? Check the studs in her high school to see who might have done a little bragging back then. As a rule, they like to tell the world about their conquests. Don't forget the girls. They sometimes know more than the boys. If she was working then, see if the parents remember a night she came home late, if the kids remember or the pay records show her late for a shift, leaving early, or missing one entirely. In the meantime, keep your eyes open for someone who left town since she died, or suddenly leaves when you keep poking around. Move as fast as you can. You may not come up with the answer, but you'll have something to work with after she's buried and forgotten by the town. You have one advantage. You're the boss. No one can tell you to drop your investigation."

She'd folded her arms beneath her ample breasts, hunched slightly forward as if afraid the wind would take away some of his words, standing like that after he finished as if listening for an echo.

She finally straightened and smiled. "Damned if I'd want you after me, Klauder. It isn't that I might not have thought of some of those things, but I'd have scrambled from one to the other, not knowing what I was doing."

When they reached the car, she opened the door and faced him across the roof. "That's what happened to you. You were told to drop an investigation."

He shrugged. "Even if you find what you're looking for, you may not have enough hard evidence to do something about it."

She said nothing more until the car was halfway to his cabin.

"Just between the two of us, Klauder, if I find what I'm looking for, I won't *need* hard evidence to do something about it."

The way she said it told him he'd been right. There was more here than a county sheriff not believing a pretty seventeen-year-old had jumped from a bridge.

**L**ike a pleasant guest at the hotel in town who decided not to pay his bill, summer left in the middle of an October night, and Klauder woke to find the ground covered with frost, leaves not yet turned color drifting down, and his Jeep filmed with frozen condensation.

Meg Boniface had only waved when she'd seen him in town shopping or when he drove in for dinner occasionally—a man can stomach only so many microwave dinners before saying to hell with it—and if he hadn't known how long some investi-

gations took, he might have thought she'd put it aside.

He didn't even consider asking. Having set a goal, she'd move toward it like a glacier moving to the sea. If she had to retrace the girl's route that night on her hands and knees, hunched over a magnifying glass like a ponderous Sherlock Holmes, she'd do it. If she had to account for the movements of everyone in the entire county, she'd do it, and if she had to go back over some stories again and again, she'd do that, too.

He almost always drove in to watch Monday night football on the big screen in the bar and grill—not because of the larger picture particularly but because football was better watched in the company of others who had never outgrown the fantasy of playing. They yelled, laughed, cursed, wagered, criticized, and consumed beer, Klauder with them and thinking they all played a larger, more important game every day of their lives, where a spectral quarterback completed passes over and around them, fate trap-blocked them, and unseen officials penalized them for infractions they had never known they'd committed.

The Bills edged the Rams in the final seconds with a touchdown, and the roars could have been heard in the stadium some two hundred miles away. The

screen went blank, and he joined the tide of people washing out into the parking lot and disintegrating among the cars.

Below the shouted good-nights and the taunts and the crows of victory, an undercurrent of whispering and key passing was taking place. Parked near the exit was one of the county's black and whites. Although the bar closed at eleven—cautious Trevane, the owner, taking no chances on a lawsuit that could result from a juiced up driver trying to cut-block a tree on the way home—too many bloodstreams retained enough alcohol content to melt a breathalyzer hose, and the most sober were being pressed into service as driver, at least until the car was beyond the reach of the long arm of the law.

The sight of Meg Boniface, jacket collar turned up, arms folded and face grim, leaning against the back of Klauder's Jeep in the cold night like judgment-come-to-call, turned the usual brake-squealing, tire-smoking departures into a stately, slow-moving procession that would have done credit to a funeral cortege.

"Good game, Klauder?"

"One of the best."

"In a hurry to get home?"

*Who isn't, at twelve thirty in the morning?*

"Thought we'd have a little

talk. I took the night shift."

She had a way of stringing two sentences together that was disconcerting. While still absorbing the first, his mind had to change direction and hurry to catch up with the second.

"I don't have to be anywhere in the morning."

She pushed away from the Jeep. "Follow me to the office."

He parked the Jeep in a slot in front of the county courthouse marked with a little sign that said RESERVED FOR COUNTY COMMISSIONER.

The young deputy sorting papers at a desk in the sheriff's office had sunbleached hair that was too long, a lamp-maintained tan, and bulging muscles displayed by a skintight tailored shirt. Klauder had first seen him in the grill hitting on one of the waitresses. He hadn't liked him then. He didn't like him now. The Golden Boy image didn't fit in with the other deputies, who were a good cross-section of the overweight, underweight, hairy, bald, ugly, and generally physically unprepossessing population at large.

Her office was at the far end, her name on the door. Alongside the deputy, a long table held several radios, one a scanner monitoring neighboring and state police frequencies like the one in his cabin. Meg swept a hand at the deputy.

"Tod Shaw. Engaged to the English teacher at the high school."

She spit the name out like something that tasted bad, while the deputy's eyes slid off both of them as though neither existed.

No love lost between them. Klauder wondered if his engagement as part of the introduction was supposed to convey something derogatory or was another sample of her fractured thinking.

In the office, she closed the door and motioned him to a chair.

"I want to thank you, Klauder. Knowing what to look for made a big difference. The coroner found a trace of cement dust on one hand. Just luck it was still there. Since we thought it was a suicide, no one used plastic protectors. Another of our little mistakes. The state police lab did find dust and abraded fibers on the front of her jeans and scratches on the toes of her sneakers." She shrugged. "I guess they're called athletic shoes or something now, but I still call them sneakers."

As on the bridge, he felt as though one part of her brain was involved in the conversation while the other was Lord knows where again.

"Anyway, we all agreed she must have put her hands on the parapet and boosted herself up.

My idea someone threw her over seems to be mistaken."

He was sitting at one point of a triangle between her and Tod. She had her elbows on the desk, her fingers laced together. Through the glass partition, he watched the deputy continue to sort papers he obviously didn't give a damn about, popping one into a file folder now and then.

"Didn't solve the problem of who the father was, though. As far as the blood test is concerned, nothing. The coroner says there are only a few places in the country with equipment sophisticated enough to determine anything of importance, so he's just holding the sample. About talking to the kids at the high school, I wondered why Tod always used to end up there until he told me about his English teacher, so I thought they'd be more inclined to talk to him than to me. After all, the kids all knew him and why he was there, and even without that, Klauder, look at him. Handsome, muscled, macho, gun on his hip and star on his chest. Can you imagine any of those high school girls not swooning when he smiles at her? They'd fight for a chance to talk to him, tell him anything he'd want to know. Maybe even make up a story or two. Nothing. Zilch. General consensus was that Cindy was one step over a fe-

male nerd and no boy would be interested."

He wondered if Tod had done something during those interviews she hadn't liked.

"Of course, they didn't know about the pregnancy. I didn't let that become general knowledge. No one's business, really."

He agreed with that.

Tod scooped up the files as though he'd had enough, dropped them into a drawer, slammed it shut, and poked his head into her office. "I'll take that swing through town now. I'll be back in an hour."

An expression washed over her face so quickly Klauder almost missed it. She didn't give a damn if he disappeared forever.

"Leave the door open so I can hear the radio."

Tod left, carrying his jacket. Cool night or not, the muscles had to be displayed.

Her voice continued. "In the meantime, I checked the phone company. Technology has caught up with us even out here, Klauder. The records showed three calls placed from that phone between four thirty and five. One was to the parents of one of the kids, asking if they wanted her to bring home a couple of burgers for a family snack when she was through. One was to a long distance number by a salesman using a credit card. The third, believe it or

not, was to this office."

Klauder straightened. He'd begun to wonder why she'd brought him here at this hour, telling him things that could have waited.

She looked down at her hands. "A little strange, don't you think? A kid who just learned she was pregnant calls the sheriff's office. Why? To file a complaint?"

In the outer office, the running, lonely green light of the scanner continued its perpetual search for voices in the night.

"Who took the call?"

"Ah. We've exposed a deficiency in our operation, Klauder. In the interest of saving a few budget dollars, no operator and no tape monitor. Anyone free picks up a ringing phone but is supposed to log it, even if it's a wife who wants to know why her husband is late for dinner. The call came in at four forty, some of the day shift late in leaving, some of the evening shift late getting in. Half a dozen men. None had a record of the call. What conclusion would you draw from that?"

She already had her answer, he thought.

She did. "It was for the man who took the call, right? And what do you think she'd have to say to him?"

They both knew the answer to that.

Except for the occasional ra-

dio voice, the office was quiet. No car purred by on the street. No phone rang. Graveyard shift in a county with 4.4 people per square mile.

"Does it matter? Your evidence said the girl jumped."

He could have sworn she didn't hear him, wouldn't have heard him if he'd yelled.

She left the desk to look out the window at the street, her voice low as if talking to herself. "Four of the men subscribe to the save-your-ass school by keeping very detailed and very accurate logs, all are married, have children, and three cried when we found her. Of the other two, Juliano never picks up a phone if he can avoid it because his ex-wife might be calling for money, and Tod, who sometimes edges around the rules. It could have been Juliano. He has an ex-wife because he has dozens of ex-girlfriends, many acquired while he was married, and he doesn't confine himself to any age group. Or maybe Tod took the call. Because he was working on his English teacher didn't mean he wouldn't take a side trip with a starry-eyed teenager once in a while."

Klauder didn't have to open the envelope to see which nominee had won.

She crooked a finger at him. He joined her at the window. Outside, Tod was standing alongside a car pulled up to the



curb, enough light filtering beneath the roof to show the driver was a woman.

"Amazing, isn't it?" she said. "One thirty in the morning, nothing moving in the whole damned town, but he's talking to a woman out there. I swear that if there was only one in a thousand square miles, he'd find her. Or she'd find him."

"What did he say?" asked Klauder.

"I asked him . . ." she glanced at her watch " . . . an hour and a half ago. No one here but the two of us, so he took no risk in talking. You were right about the bragging. Said the kid was all over him, wouldn't leave him alone—"

"They always see it that way," he said.

"—so he met her a few times during the summer. After she called him that day, he picked her up down the road and drove out to the bridge. Seventeen-year-old with dreams. Lord knows what he told her that kept her quiet before, but she wasn't about to keep quiet now. It was time to declare their love to the world and get married." The angry hand she slapped against the wall beside the window echoed like a pistol shot. "Hell, I wish I had a dime for every female who fell . . . myself included . . . but what counts is how the man handles it. Mr. Sensitive told her that it was

her problem. She left the car and ran out on the bridge. He let her go. Said that he thought she'd come back after a good cry and he'd drive her back to town. The moon was out, he said, so he could see her. Before he knew what she was up to or could stop her, she climbed up and went over. From the bridge, he could see her lying down there. He got her purse and schoolbag from the car, put them on the bridge, and went on his way. I asked why he hadn't checked to see if she was still alive. No point, he said. Her jumping had solved the problem for both of them."

Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Haven't felt more like shooting a man since I was seventeen myself. Surprise you, Klauder?"

"No," he said. "We've all been seventeen at one time or another. Most of us survive somehow."

"I would have thrown him out then and there, but I have to file charges and back them up, and I can't. My word against his. He knows that. Don't worry about getting rid of him, he said, because the father of the English teacher offered him a job and he was leaving anyway, as if that would settle it all. If I say anything, he'll deny it. According to him, no one ever saw them together, and no one saw them that night. There you

have it, Klauder. He might as well have thrown her off the bridge, and for my money, he did. He could have stood behind her and boosted her over, which would also account for the dust and the abrasions. You want a motive? I'll give it to you. Having the kid turn up pregnant might enhance his macho image, true, but his prospective father-in-law is loaded and while he might talk his way around the schoolteacher, he knows he couldn't do that with the old man, who I understand doesn't care for him much anyway. The trouble is I can't prove a damned thing. I'm so damned mad I can't think, so I went and got you. What do I do now?"

The question was humble, bewildered, despairing. That spectral quarterback had just completed a scoring pass over her outstretched fingers, she'd been knocked off her feet by a blindside block, and the official had thrown a yellow flag on her.

Tod was performing some sort of ritual courting dance. Hands on roof of car. Straighten, arms folded. Hands on car door, intimately, face close to woman's. Stand erect again, muscles flexing. Sometimes he was in full light from the street lamp, sometimes half silhouetted, the play of light and shadow—

"He's yours, isn't he?"

The silence grew before the

words fell softly like the October leaves.

"Damn you, Klauder. How could you know?"

"The way he moves . . . your concern over the girl . . . wanting to shoot a man at seventeen . . ." And a lifetime of reading people.

She sighed. "Something in the hormones must make some of us brainless, or a big, gawky kid would have realized a man like that . . . he looks just like his father, Klauder . . . wouldn't have been interested in her personality or intelligence. But what the hell. It's been happening for centuries. I had no choice. I gave the baby up, never saw him again. When he walked in looking for the job, I thought, couldn't be, just couldn't, but I had to check. A friend here and there, the badge behind me—"

*Tod at the high school, courting his schoolteacher, would have known all the teenagers. She'd have suspected from the beginning . . .*

"Does he know?"

"I'm just the fat old woman he works for."

There might have been a trace of tears or regret in her voice. "Little like Bogie in *Casablanca*, Klauder. Of all the damned sheriff's offices in . . . he had to walk into mine . . ." The voice strengthened. "Sure, I hired him. What woman wouldn't? Maybe I was

hoping he wasn't as big a bum as his father. I was wrong. He's a bigger one. But if you think it makes a difference, think again. I paid my dues. He'll damned well pay his, no matter who he is. The question stands. What do I do now?"

Whatever internal devils she was struggling with, he could do little to help. If indeed she wanted that sort of help. She was one of those people who resolved their internal conflicts alone. For them, the term support group referred to a display of elastic hose.

Like the scanner seeking voices, he searched for words.

"If you really want to . . . if you can do it now . . . just keep going." If any woman could, she could, he told himself. "There's something out there he didn't think of. He was a fool to talk to you because now you can take his story apart sentence by sentence, word by word. Challenge everything. He said no one ever saw him, hadn't seen them that night. He can't be certain. Neither can you. *You* go to the kids. You no longer have to ask who they'd seen her with. Ask if they'd seen her with *him*. People sometimes overlook a patrol car, a policeman. They're supposed to be around, and they assume you want to know about someone who isn't."

She suddenly went to the

desk and picked up the phone, and Klauder, busy with his own thoughts and watching Tod's courting dance slowing down as if the female wasn't impressed, paid no attention to whom she was calling until she said, "I want you to hear this," and passed the phone to him.

A female voice said, "Yes, there was a full moon that night but it was completely obscured in your area by nine, when heavy clouds moved in from a front which brought showers the next day."

"Could you fax something on that to Sheriff Boniface?"

"I'd be happy to," said the voice.

He cradled the phone. "What made you think of the moon?"

"A case Lincoln was supposed to have won because the witness said there was a moon that night. He proved there wasn't. I remembered there had been no moonlight when we found her and wondered what time it had disappeared."

"Good start. His story is beginning to come apart."

"Why in the hell would he lie about something like that?"

He couldn't tell if Tod was winning or losing, but the action outside was beginning to pick up.

"The reasons people lie are as varied as the lies themselves so I could be wrong, but try this. He thought he was in the clear

until you came up with the phone call. He could stonewall but you'd keep after him, so he fed you a partially true story that would get you off his back. She probably did run out on the bridge and leave him sitting in the car, but when she didn't return, he became nervous. In the dark, he couldn't see her. For all he knew she'd kept running and could be anywhere, and by this time he must have realized that if the story came out, good-bye marriage. He found her on the bridge and—"

"He lifts weights," she said dully. "A hundred and ten pound kid would be nothing."

"It might not have been exactly that way, but it has to be close. You'd have never bought a story about her disappearing into the dark. It would have left too many things open, and he'd have had to come up with too many hard to believe answers. Did he look for her? Why not? Questions and more questions. He had to say he *saw* her jump to give you a definite suicide. With a witness. Case closed. He was a prize sleaze, but so what? You'd no longer be looking for a killer."

He walked to the door slowly. There was no question in his mind that she'd known where she was going all along and had used him to help her get there. He understood why. She'd been hoping they'd come up with

something she could use in court. They hadn't. And they wouldn't. Which reminded him of something she'd said.

"When I told you you might not come up with enough hard evidence, you said you wouldn't need any to do something about it. I hope you didn't have something stupid in mind, especially since you're his—"

"Biological mother only, Klauder." She shook her head, the short hair swirling. "I don't owe him a damned thing. I owe Cindy and maybe another seventeen-year-old somewhere down the road—"

He told himself it was something he had to know. "You never said what happened to Tod's father."

"What should happen to a man like that more often. Someone shot him. They never did find out who did it, but then they had one helluva lot of people to go through. Personally, I think the sheriff at the time said to hell with it. But listen. It's obvious I'll soon have an opening for a deputy. Interested?"

In spite of what everyone thought, the transfer wasn't why he'd taken retirement. It was only the last straw. He'd become tired of the politics, scheming, paperwork, hampering regulations, long hours; sick of senseless deaths and looking at tortured and abused bodies.

"I'll think about it."

When he passed Tod and the woman, he realized it wasn't a courting dance at all but a long argument, the woman's voice angry, even though muffled, but Tod's amused.

He turned on the ignition and the shots came almost like backfires from the Jeep's cold engine. Tod lurched backward and collapsed and the car took off with screaming tires. He made mental notes as he ran, aware that Meg was lumbering down the steps, moving fast for a big woman.

The gun had probably rested on the car door, inches from Tod's chest, and if he hadn't been dead when he hit the ground, he was by the time Klauder reached him.

"Chevrolet," he said. "Late model four door. First two plate letters AZ. If you hit the radio fast, one of your cars should pick it up."

She reached down and closed Tod's eyes, the touch almost tender.

"*Dammit,*" exploded Klauder, "*aren't you going to move?*"

Kneeling there, she looked down the road after the car.

"Just like his father," she said softly. "Whole county full of suspects. Probably never find out who shot him."

He rose, staring down at her, and it dawned on him that she didn't need anything he had to say. She'd known who Tod was talking to all along.

"Very difficult to make a case without hard evidence, Klauder. You know that. Like Cindy. Damned shame. Kid was only seventeen."

The Jeep was humming, the exhaust curling white along the ground. He looked up at the spotlighted sculpture standing before the courthouse in the cool October night. Outstretched hand. Leveled scales. Blindfolded eyes. Justice. He could swear he saw a glint below the blindfold, like someone cheating at a game.

He nodded. "I'll call for an ambulance."





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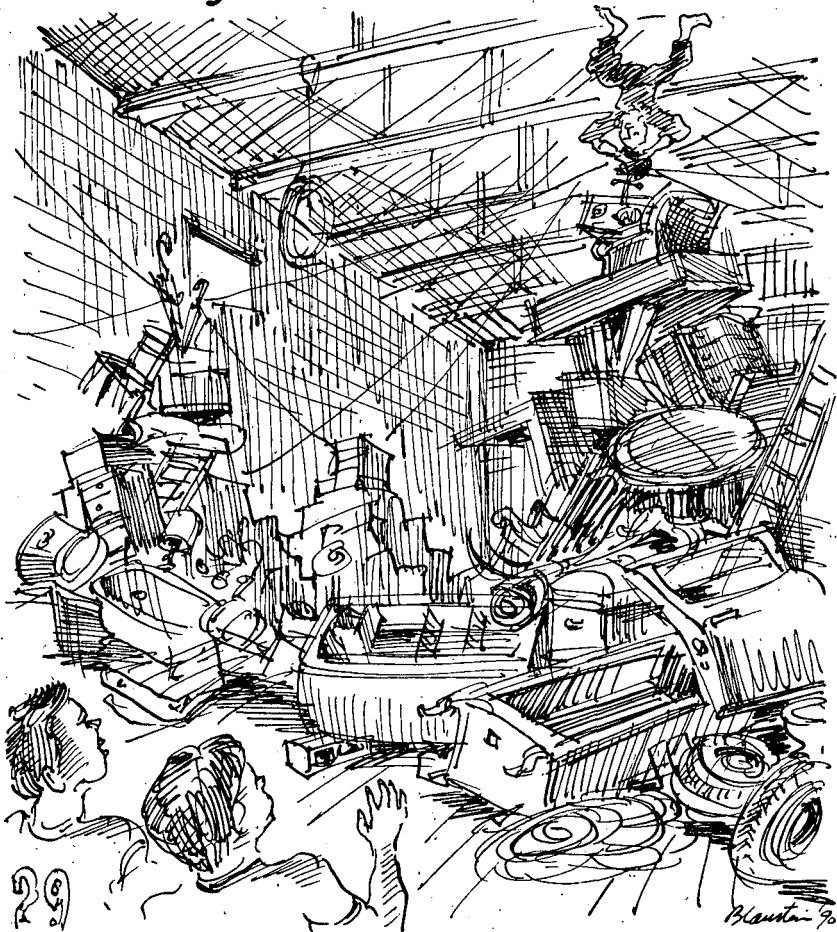
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FICTION

# The Balancing Man

by Charles Ardai



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Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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I was eleven when my brother Friendly took me to see the balancing man.

The day we went was a hot spring Wednesday, the kind when it can be three o'clock but the sweat in you thinks it's high noon. Friendly and I were slacking off behind the heaven elm in the school courtyard, lazing in its shade and putting off going back inside as long as we could. School was no place to be on a day like this. Anyone with half a brain could see that, Friendly said.

It wasn't long before it became too late for us to go to class with an excuse about forgetting what time it was—exactly when we passed the point of no return I can't say, but at one point we both knew that we had. The only thing keeping us where we were then was the shade of that towering elm . . . but it was hardly the only tree around. So we got to our feet and stepped out into the sun, crimping our eyes shut and wiping our necks and foreheads as trickles of sweat started bubbling up.

We dashed up over Morton's Hill and into the wilds at the edge of school grounds, plunging through the forest and changing course to meet any big tree we saw, among whose roots we could spend a few minutes lying around and breathing in the scent of the damp earth. Friendly climbed some trees, too, because that's the sort of thing he liked to do; as for me, I like the ground and was more than happy to stay on it.

For a while our path kept us in sight of the schoolyard—we ducked into the undergrowth and held our breaths whenever we thought someone in the yard was looking our way—but pretty soon we'd wandered far enough to be completely lost. Luckily, Friendly had a good sense of direction and he was able to tell where we had gotten to just by looking at the moss on the trees or something like that. I trusted him and he trusted himself; so we kept on walking and whistling and sitting under trees until we came to a path and I realized that we hadn't just been wandering, we had been heading somewhere.

Now, I wasn't angry really, because I had no call to be, but I was a little peeved that Friendly had known all along where we were going. The whole point of wandering is not having to get somewhere, and knowing that we'd had a goal all along took away some of the fun.

"Ted," Friendly said when I told him this, "you don't know anything. Where we're going's better than just wandering. You'll see."

And that took care of that, because when Friendly said something like that, he meant it.

We went down the path till it crossed Tocolow Road, then took a shortcut through someone's property and over an old wood bridge. Eventually we found ourselves on another dirt path, this one even narrower than the first. It looked like a driveway someone had started and then abandoned when he decided not to bother building a house after all. Sure enough, where the path ended there was no house, just a cleared area and a tall red wood barn.

No house, but a barn? Friendly was right. This was interesting.

"Now, listen," he told me. He bent over with his hands on his knees even though I was almost as tall as he was. I bent over, too, so he could whisper in my ear. "You've got to do exactly as I say. Okay?"

I nodded.

"When we go inside," he said, "you can't talk. You can't make any noise at all. You understand?"

I nodded.

"And when I pull on your arm like this—" he tugged on one of my sleeves—"you just follow me out. Got that?"

I nodded. Friendly straightened up and started off down the path, but I ran after him and caught one of his belt loops. He spun around.

"Friendly, what's inside?" I said.

He clamped his hand over my mouth and darted glances left and right. "Shhh!"

I tried to talk through his hand but couldn't make a sound, so I licked his palm. He jerked it away and wiped it on his jeans. This time I whispered.

"Friendly, what's in there?"

"You'll see," he said. "Come on."

He took one of my hands in one of his and pulled me toward the barn. As we got closer, he slouched down a little and took his steps more slowly, careful not to make a sound. I did the same.

We ran out of path about five yards short of the barn, and from there I could see that the doors were already open a little. I wondered if Friendly had known they would be, and if so how, but I had promised not to talk, so I didn't. Friendly crept up to the doors and stuck his head in, then waved his hand for me to join him. I went as quietly as I could, though when I reached Friendly's side he frowned in a way that told me I had made too much noise. He

put his finger to his lips again, stepped through the door, and pulled me inside by my shirt collar.

I must have looked completely confused—I remember that my eyes opened so wide they hurt—because Friendly broke his own rule. He stuck his mouth right up against my ear and hissed; "*It's the balancing man.*"

It certainly was.

The inside of the barn was hollowed out: no stables, no loft, no troughs, nothing you'd expect to find in a barn. But it wasn't empty. It was the furthest thing from empty. It was full. Only it wasn't full of anything that made sense.

It was full of trestles and sawhorses, pewter cooking pots and lacquered settees, long dangling hanks of rope and window shutters and automobile doors. It was full of garden hoses, long canvas mail sacks, and a jackhammer. It was full of television antennas and serving platters.

Right in front of us, perched on a pair of cinder blocks, there was a refrigerator, turned over on its side. On top of the refrigerator there was a hat stand, and wedged on top of the hat stand was an extension ladder stretched out horizontally to its full length of ten feet or so. At either end, the ladder was strung with lengths of copper wire; the wire went straight up for maybe twenty feet, where it was looped on one side around a pair of umbrellas and on the other around a metal statue of a baseball player. I can't tell you what the umbrellas and the statue were connected to since that would just bring up the same question again and it would all take too long in the telling; but I'll tell you, looking around the barn I saw more *things*, connected up in more ways, than I'd ever seen before.

There was a grandfather clock with its pendulum missing dangling high overhead. There was a set of golf clubs roped together to prop up an upended washbasin. There was a well bucket tied to the end of a long, colorful scarf. There was a tambourine. There was a box of crackers. Anything you'd care to name was in there somewhere.

All this stuff was piled up like a mighty ziggurat, only instead of coming to a point at the top, it came to maybe a dozen points, each sticking out like a turret from a castle. The turrets were tied to each other with thick cables of wire, like tightropes in the circus. On one of these cables I could see a lemon crate, and sticking out of the lemon crate there was a sword, and balanced on the pommel

of the sword there was a bicycle seat. Squatting on the bicycle seat, forty feet up, was an old man.

He sat, and he looked straight ahead, and he seemed not to notice the extremely perilous position he was in. For although the structure had outcroppings in every possible direction and at every possible location, he had chosen the one spot I could see where a slip would be certain to pitch him the whole forty feet to the ground.

It was something like watching an act in the circus, except that nothing happened. The man sat, and he sat, and he didn't budge, and though I couldn't tell from so far below, I wouldn't have been surprised to learn that he wasn't even blinking. I remember thinking that if I were perched on a bicycle seat, on a sword, on a lemon crate, on a highwire, I wouldn't budge either.

I looked away from the man, away from the huge tower of odds and ends, at the only spot of sense my eyes could find: my own shoes. But no sooner had my head stopped spinning a little than Friendly was tugging on my sleeve. My first thought was that we were leaving, but when I looked up I saw that Friendly was pointing. The man now had his hands pressed down on the bicycle seat with his long legs extended out to either side of him. As I watched, he turned himself over entirely, resting the top of his head on the bicycle seat and curling his arms around his chest and his legs around each other.

Then he didn't budge again for the longest time.

I didn't want to stay. I was frightened for the old man; he was sure to fall and I didn't want to see it happen. So I tugged on Friendly's sleeve and pleaded with him silently.

He ignored me and started walking around the base of the zigurat, poking a finger in here, staring through a gap there. I wished that he would stop, but there didn't seem to be anything I could do to make him. I followed him around the wall of the barn, once or twice glancing up and then glancing down again quickly.

When we reached the side of the barn opposite where we had come in, I saw three other kids already there, huddled in the shadows, watching the balancing man. I looked at the three boys closely, but I didn't recognize them. They looked about my brother's age or maybe a little bit older.

They made room for us on the floor. Friendly sat down, so I had to, too. They all looked up with big smiles on their faces, as though there were a giant television screen under the roof and it was showing their favorite program.



The balancing man was still standing on his head, and it was then that I realized just how old he was. His beard hung down at least two feet in front of his face, long and off-white, the color that curtains get if you don't wash them very often. He was wearing a black turtleneck shirt and a black vest with black trousers, but because of his position I could see bits of his arms and legs, which were very thin: he looked like a doll made out of straw.

But he must have been strong! Stronger than anyone in the world, to be able to balance the way he did! And more than strong; he must have been . . . I couldn't think of the word I wanted. Today, I think of the word "agile," but that falls so far short of describing this extraordinary man that I think I was better off when I couldn't think of a word at all. I was amazed, and more than amazed: I was shocked. I was impressed. I was frightened. And I was embarrassed for watching, for Friendly and the other boys' gawking. Because I knew now, from the way Friendly had spoken, that this wasn't the first time he had come here.

At least the balancing man didn't seem to know we were there; I was glad about that. But I was also terrified. What if one of us should bump into something, or stick his finger where it didn't belong? It would be a tragedy.

I closed my eyes and pressed my chin to my chest and didn't look up again even when Friendly tapped on my shoulder and tried to lift my chin. I didn't open my eyes until Friendly hissed in my ear, "Okay, come on!"

The other three boys were already halfway to the door and Friendly was edging in that direction. I went with him. Still, I couldn't resist the urge to look up once more, and when I didn't see the balancing man on the crate my heart leapt up into my throat. Then I caught sight of him only a few feet away, walking easily along another of the cables. His stride was long and brave, and so perfectly composed—he even had his hands in his pockets!—that I felt sure for a moment that walking on a wire must be the most natural thing on earth for him. He had such an air of unconcern about him that I felt as though my amazement at his performance was somehow unwarranted. How much of a fool would I have thought someone who had praised my ability to lie in bed without falling out, or to comb my hair without putting out an eye?

My head swam with confusion and I was so relieved when we reached the door that I ran through it and down the driveway without waiting for Friendly.

I didn't run far, though, and Friendly caught up with me quickly. We sat down together in the woods. He looked at me with a sort of sly pride in his face, as though he had just initiated me into some delicious, illicit pleasure.

"So? What'd you think?"

I shook my head. It didn't help. "Who is he?" I asked.

"Who cares?" Friendly said. "He's some guy. He's a nut. He's an alien from outer space. What difference does it make? He's just someone. What do you think?"

"I don't get it."

Friendly laughed and lay back against the root of a tree. "Nope, I bet you don't."

"Do *you*?" If anyone understood this, I was sure it would be Friendly.

"Sure," he said. "The man's a loony-tune."

"But how does he do it?" I asked.

"How? He probably collects up junk from around here. Maybe he steals things."

"No, I mean how does he . . . balance?"

Friendly shrugged. Then he said very quietly, "I hear that crazy people are twelve times stronger than normal people."

"Really?"

Friendly nodded. Then he sat up and put his hands on my shoulders. "You can't tell anyone about this," he said. "Especially Mom and Dad. You understand?"

I nodded.

"Good." He ruffled my hair and stood up, brushing soil off his jeans. "Now let's go home."

It wasn't easy, but as Friendly led me home, I forced myself to remember the path we took.

The second time I went by myself. It was a Saturday, and I told everyone that I was going to meet Jesse at his house. I told Jesse, too, and he said he'd cover for me.

This time the barn doors were closed, but they still weren't locked. I opened them gently, just far enough for me to squeeze in. To make sure that I was alone I walked all the way around the barn. I was.

Then I looked for the balancing man, but I couldn't see him—it was still too early in the day for much light to come in through the barn's windows. I stood where I was and I waited, and in a while

my eyes adjusted until I could make out the old man's shape up on the highest point of the tower.

Both of his feet were crowded onto the top of what was either a basketball or a volleyball. The ball itself was perched at one end of a steep wooden plank and I couldn't see why it didn't roll down and take him with it.

In one hand he had what looked like a metal coffeepot and he was using it to water some plants that were growing out of a porcelain bathtub. When he was done, he set the pot down on the edge of the bathtub and turned completely around with a single, sudden twist of his torso. The ball started to carry him down the incline, slowly at first, then at a tremendous rate. At the end of the plank there was a circular hole through which the ball dropped into a net—but the balancing man sailed off the end of the platform, aimed right at the wall of the barn.

As he flew, he stretched one of his arms out behind him and snagged an upright flagpole, which whipped him around in a half circle and deposited him on a small wooden platform a few feet below. My heart very generously started beating again.

I had to fight a strong urge to run away. I wasn't even sure why I had come. Crazy people were twelve times stronger than regular people, after all—of which strength I had just seen a fine demonstration—so I was scared.

But there are some things in life which you can't just see once and pass over without questioning. There are some bits of food which are too big to swallow unchewed. Even at eleven I wasn't like Friendly, who could see the balancing man and think only of his own entertainment. What I didn't realize until much later is that people like Friendly are, perhaps, to be envied.

I waited until the balancing man was balanced steadily on his bicycle seat and then I said, "Good morning." I didn't want to startle him—I certainly didn't want him to fall—but somehow I was confident that I wouldn't and he wouldn't. I spoke loudly, but not suddenly.

He looked down and I could almost see him straining to make me out. "Good morning," he said.

His voice was small and distant, which was not a surprise. But it was also clear and deep, with none of the taints that age so often brings. He did not seem disturbed by my presence.

"My name is Ted," I said, a little louder.

"Mine isn't," he said.

"What is your name?" I asked. He didn't answer. This he didn't seem to have heard.

I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted: "What are you doing up there?"

"I'm balancing," he said.

"But why?" I asked.

"Because if I didn't balance," he said, "I'd fall."

He slid off his perch and sat down on the cable, his skinny legs dangling over the edge.

"Why don't you come down?" I shouted.

"Why don't you come up?" he said.

I didn't know what to say. "Because I don't know how! I wouldn't be safe! I'd fall!"

"Exactly," the balancing man said. As though this was his reason, too.

"Don't you *ever* come down?" I said.

"No. It's dangerous."

I waved my arm at the structure beneath him. "Where did this come from?"

"Where did that come from?" The balancing man pointed out one of the windows. "Where did you come from?"

"I came from home," I said. "I wanted to know if you needed any help."

For a long time he didn't speak. I began to think he wasn't going to. Then he said, "No, you didn't. You don't understand me. You are afraid of me. That's why you came."

It was, more or less, the truth.

"The feeling," he said, and here his voice trembled a little, "is mutual."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It means, young man, that I am afraid of you."

"Of me?"

"No," the balancing man said. "Of *you*."

"I don't understand—"

"Please," the old man said suddenly. "Leave me alone."

I was surprised at this and a little bit hurt. Neither of us moved for a good five minutes, and then I lowered my head and walked out. I did not go back.

Friendly did go back. I couldn't stop him. In all honesty, I didn't try; but it wouldn't have mattered if I had. It was a hangout for those kids we had seen there and a couple of others. (Friendly told

me names, but I've forgotten them, if I ever remembered.) They were his friends now, and you could have made him give up his own family before you'd have gotten him to stop going to that barn.

Once he asked me to go with him again; when I refused, he made fun of me. Another time he tried to take me there without telling me where we were going, like the first time, but I got wise when we hit Tocolow Road and I screamed at him like I had the devil in me. I said I'd tell Mom and Dad. He told me to go to hell then, that he'd stab me in my sleep if I did any such thing. Friendly and I didn't talk much after that day.

But I knew he kept going back because it showed in his face, the way it would show when he had his hands behind his back in the wintertime and you could just *tell* that he had a snowball he was about to throw. He had a secret, and he wanted it to stay that way, but part of him wanted to shout it out to the world: *I'm Friendly Cooper and have I got something to tell you!* That was the part that showed in his face.

And sometimes it wasn't even a matter of reading his face. Sometimes he'd just come right out and tell me, almost like he was daring me to do something about it. He told me when they snuck eight people in there at once—and *the guy didn't notice a thing! What do you think of that, Ted?* He told me when Martin, or Mark, or someone, burped real loud and someone else laughed, *but that guy must be blind, or deaf maybe, 'cause you could see he didn't hear a thing!* He told me the day one of them climbed up on top of the refrigerator and sat on it—and *then he got down real quick, but nothing happened, the guy didn't notice.* So of course they all had to do it. And then, of course, someone climbed a little higher.

And then one afternoon Friendly came home glowering, his eyes set in furious determination, his breathing deliberate like a bull's when he's led into the ring. Martin had climbed up past the refrigerator, Friendly said, over the ladder, through the barrel, and up over the automobile tires when that old monster came up behind him and kicked him off. He just *kicked* him off. He put his foot on Martin's back and pushed, and the whole stack of tires fell and Martin fell with them, maybe fifteen feet. The others picked him up because he couldn't walk, and they beat it the hell out of there. When they got to Martin's house, they told his mother he'd fallen out of a tree. She took him to a doctor in Port and the doctor said his leg was broke clean through.

Friendly's face was white with terror and red with shame and

black with anger as he told me this. Until you see a face like that you can't imagine what it looks like. I hope you never do.

I never have since, except that I've seen it quite a lot in my dreams. Usually it's superimposed over a headline from the *Gavin County Dispatch*. The paper's dated a week later and the headline says

### FIRE DESTROYS TWO ACRES

and the story tells how the volunteer fire department managed to contain a potentially devastating fire on one small plot of land. The story is basically an upbeat one, and why not? No one lived on that land; it was just being used as a dumping ground by people in the area, judging by the burned-up junk the firemen found at the center of the blaze. And the firemen got there in time to put it out before it spread. A happy day all around.

If I'm lucky, the dream stops there—I wake up sweating into my sheets like I'm under a heat lamp and my heart's beating so hard my ribs ache, but at least I'm awake. Then there are the other nights, the ones when the dream goes on the same as it did the first time, when I was eleven years old and sleeping right down the hall from my parents.

Sometimes Friendly's in it, sometimes he's not. Sometimes I'm in it. Sometimes I pour the gasoline and light the match. But the part that's always the same is what comes next, after the boys all run away.

Flames bite into the walls of the barn, climb gently, slowly up toward the roof, lighting the red wood a fine, smoldering orange. And as the flames climb, a spark catches here, on the wooden stave of a barrel, a spark catches there, on the fringes of a scarf held up with clothespins.

The old man squats on his bicycle seat, on the sword, on the lemon crate, on the highwire, forty feet up, and he doesn't notice right away. Then he smells something; then he glimpses the first flames; then he sees the barrel collapse onto itself, all flame and ashes, the scarf curl up and blacken in an instant.

He jumps off the seat onto the cable, and the crate, the sword, and the seat fall the forty feet and smash on the floor. He sees more flames: in front of him, so he turns around, but they're behind him, too. He shimmies up a wire, climbs over some boxes, and then the flame's under him, slapping hungry tongues against his feet.



Soft metals melt, wood burns, cloth vanishes; and all the connections come apart one by one. A turret tips and falls. The cable snarls under his feet and he leaps to another cable, a higher plank, until he's all the way up by the bathtub with his plants.

At this point, the dream can go one of two ways, depending on whether the plank he's standing on burns up quickly enough or the roof collapses, crushing him first.

If I'm lucky here, I wake up in tears. If I'm unlucky, I dream it all over again.

And you wonder, why? I said it myself, I couldn't have talked Friendly out of going; and even if I could have, the others would still have been there. Nothing would have been different. Maybe at eleven I'm entitled to a measure of irrational guilt, but at forty?

But you've got it wrong. It isn't guilt and it never has been. It's grief.

I'll be honest with you. I hadn't had this dream in a long time. Years. I hadn't thought about any of it in ages. The only reason it came back now is because of another headline I read, just last week:

### WEEKEND RAMPAGE

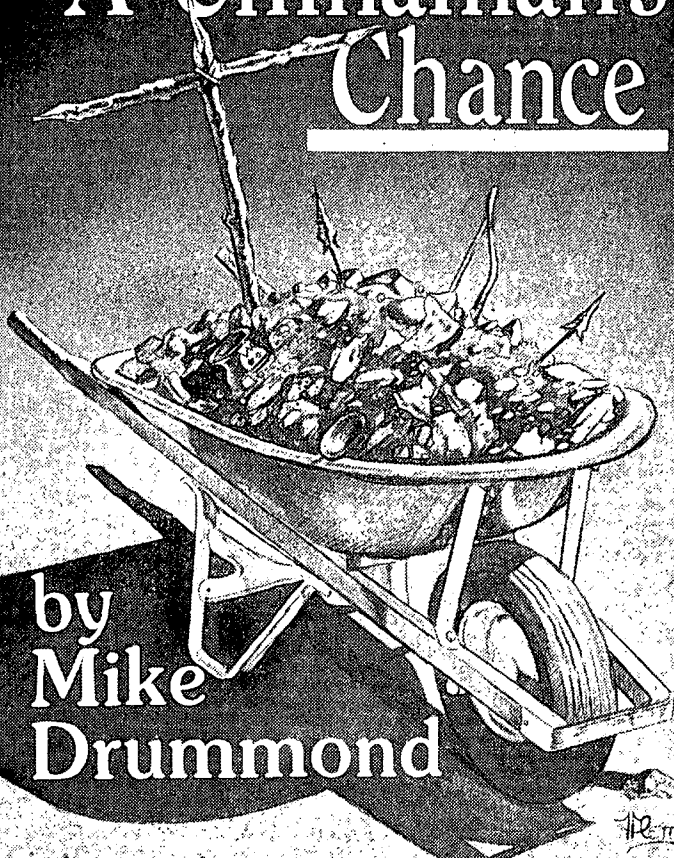
It seems that some teenagers went into Central Park late last Saturday night, found a dozen homeless people sleeping in cardboard boxes, and set them on fire. Then they went home.

And I can't help but think about the old man on his highwire saying he was afraid not of me, but of *us*.

He had every reason to be.

# A Chinaman's Chance

by  
**Mike  
Drummond**



**A** hundred years ago over five thousand Chinese goldminers lived and worked and dreamed and died in a hard, rocky canyon draw not far from here. Because they were Chinese, they labored

harder than most, saddled as they were with the added burdens of hatred and discrimination. They weren't allowed to work down in the mines, and the placer, or surface, gold was gone—every exposed nook and

cranny had been picked clean several times over. So they worked the tailings, the dregs, the mountains of "waste" spewed forth from the mines. How much gold they took will never be known, nor who they were. Accurate records were not kept—it was a tumultuous time, and an honest public accounting would inevitably lead to robbery, or even murder. It was healthier, then, to be anonymous and secretive... a philosophy that many residents of this area continue to embrace to this day.

There is no monument of stone and steel erected in the loving memory of these men, nor any ruins, or even grave-stones. There is only the creek that drains my land. A narrow band of water, scarcely two feet wide in the dry season, is all that commemorates those five thousand nameless Chinese adventurers. Chinaman Creek... not as evocative as some other Gold Rush names: Rough and Ready, Humbug, Hangtown, Gouge Eye, or You Bet, but certainly descriptive of this part of the Sierra Nevada range at the time.

If the times were rough on the Chinese, they were brutal on the surrounding forest and those who lived there. Primitive photographs taken to document the mining activity of the day show abject desolation... hill after hill scarred

and scraped, a battlefield of fallen timber. Here and there a spindly sapling poked above the jagged stumps of its ancestors. The mining companies were voracious in their need for beams to shore up the miles of tunnels they bored beneath the surface in their quest for gold. And the miners needed shelter and warmth. They felt it was their Godgiven right to exploit the forest to these ends. And not only timber, the creatures of that forest were there to provide the miners with food and clothing, and perhaps target practice... sport shooting, they called it. But it wasn't sport to the whitetail deer, the beaver, bear, mountain cats, and endless flocks of migrating birds.

And it wasn't sport to the Maidu Indians who had inhabited these same forests for a thousand years in a delicately balanced dance with nature. It was the beginning of their end. In twenty years' time, a government census would count less than a hundred Maidu in an area that had once supported thousands. Dead from disease, hunted down and sold into slavery, murdered by self-styled Indian fighters using tactics that were appropriate to the more belligerent ways of the Plains Indians, but were outrageous brutality against these gentler folk.

The players are all gone now:

the miners of many nations, the sifters and grifters, the sourdoughs and robber barons. The land remains, scarred but healing. In many ways, it is as if the miners were never here, as if no Chinese had ever voyaged east toward San Francisco, and no logger's axe had ever bitten into the hip of a shagbark pine. A hundred growing seasons and a hundred winter snows have removed most of the clues of the past. Unless you know where to look, and you are very lucky.

I'm lucky, and a positive thinker, but I would never have bought the place if it was still as ruined as those photographs showed it. My name is Ross MacKenzie. I own forty acres of rocks and tall trees a few miles outside of Del Oro, California. That's in the Gold Rush country on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada range. My land butts up against the boundary of the Tahoe National Forest, and it's about as pristine and wild as I'm going to find anywhere within easy commuting distance of civilization. Easy commuting if you like dirt roads, that is.

I knew a little about the history of the place when I moved here a year ago from southern California, but not as much as my sister's girl, Nicky. There's a young woman with broad interests. Nineteen years old, al-

ready through her third year of college, with no degree in sight. Nicky has changed her major almost every semester. She always promises that each change will be the last and then she plunges into the new curriculum with single-minded intensity. And she's swung in a broad, enthusiastic arc across the full range of academic disciplines: history, literature, biology, archaeology, astronomy, and finally geology and soil conservation.

That last change explained the excited call I got from Nicky and her mother a few weeks ago. Summer break was coming up, and she had landed a position in some sort of apprenticeship program with the forestry service. Nicky was flying to Reno and wanted to visit her "favorite uncle" before she started her job. I suspected that my sister wanted me to act as a standby parent for the few months that the job lasted, since I'd be only minutes away. And I was glad to provide an occasional dinner, or limousine service for Nicky on her first time away from home.

The eighty-mile drive to Reno reminded me, once again, why I'd left Los Angeles. The interstate snaked over the Sierras, through the boulders and trees, the crisp mountain air bringing color to my cheeks, and everywhere I looked I glimpsed a

rushing creek or a glimmering lake. I could spend all day driving the same distance in L.A. and never leave the tract houses. Or the smog, and grime, and crime.

The move north to the little town of Del Oro got me away from all that. Well, almost. I'm still tying up a few loose ends down south, slowly retiring from a successful and hectic career as an investment advisor. And I've taken on a few new projects up here, but of a different nature . . . so maybe I'm not retiring after all. I'm just this side of forty . . . plenty of time for a second career.

It was midmorning when I met Nicky at the Delta Airlines gate. She struggled through the door with twice the limit of legal carryons: garment bag, several shopping bags, and the blood red backpack I'd given her during her mountain climbing period. When she saw me, she let out a little yelp, carefully placed her baggage in a precise stack on the floor, and trotted over to give me a hug. Now, I'm not a big hugger, even among family, and Nicky knew it. But that time I didn't really mind; I was very glad to see her. And the way she lit up the room . . . the hippie-New Agers who have quite an enclave in Del Oro would call it her aura; I'd just call it the spark of life.

It made me feel good, I hugged her back.

She'd grown some since I'd seen her last, filled out, her body taking those last few steps toward full adulthood. But her eyes were the same: flashing, playful, inquisitive, intelligent. I knew she'd have a lifetime of success at whatever she finally chose to do.

On the drive home, Nicky talked nonstop, providing a wide-ranging commentary on the native flora and fauna and the geologic and man-made history of the region—from prehistoric glaciers, to the native Washoe and Maidu Indians, to the early American settlers. She recounted in grisly detail the story of the ill-fated Donner party, many of whom spent their final days freezing in the early winter snows a hundred and forty years ago only a few yards from where the interstate passes today. Everything excited her, everything was important.

I treated Nicky to lunch in a restaurant on Lake Tahoe's north shore. She ate lightly, claiming that college food had helped her put on a few pounds more than normal. I couldn't tell. Our table overlooked the lake and offered a panoramic view: miles of shimmering, sunlit water ringed by snow-capped mountains. Nicky's eyes drank it all in, but mostly they

fixed on mine while she told me in passionate detail of her hopes and plans for the summer. I'd heard other plans from her before and seen them unceremoniously scrapped when her focus shifted. I didn't listen to her too closely that day, and even now I can only remember that her position had a grandiose title, which I assumed, correctly, was in lieu of money. Employers who are short of funds often assign inflated job titles to disguise the slavelike nature of an entry-level job. But Nicky said she needed practical experience more than cash, anyway.

After lunch, I drove her to a point about twenty miles outside of Del Oro where there is a ranger station nestled in among the trees. This would be her home base for the summer. There was an assortment of kids about her age lounging on the pale green porch with brightly colored backpacks of their own, and by the time I'd unloaded her luggage, Nicky already knew their names, and probably could have recited their home addresses if I'd asked.

We said a quick goodbye, with promises of a future visit to my place, maybe dinner in town sometime, that sort of thing. And while I'm sure she wanted to do these things with Uncle Ross, she was also eager to get on with her own adventure. I turned the truck around

in the gravel driveway, and she waved one more goodbye from the shelter of the porch. My last glimpse of her in my rear view mirror was as she turned back to the group. I'm sure she was doing most of the talking.

I divided my time over the next few weeks between some routine business details in L.A. and some predictable construction delays on my house in Del Oro. I had misplaced the latest set of changes to the blueprints and had returned to my office one evening to look for them when the call came in. It was my sister.

"Ross, have you seen Nicky lately?"

"No, I haven't. She promised we'd get together for dinner sometime, but I left the date up to her. So far I haven't heard a thing. I don't blame her, she's probably having a great time vacuuming up pine needles or teaching squirrels to march or whatever it is that summer volunteers get to do."

My sister usually snorts at my lame jokes, but this time there was dead silence on the line. Something was wrong.

"Nicky's disappeared. No one at the forestry camp has seen her for almost a week."

"Are you sure? Maybe she decided to change her major again," I joked. But my sister wasn't buying it. I didn't really



believe it, either. Nicky wouldn't just walk out on a job, and certainly wouldn't leave her mother worrying. I took down the name of the head ranger and promised to check it out in the morning.

I was at the ranger station when it opened at eight o'clock A.M. Long shadows fell across the cabins from the surrounding trees. A wisp of smoke wafted from the chimney—it was cold in the shade, even in July. I parked in the visitor's slot next to a lone forestry department jeep and went inside.

The cabin's interior was painted institutional green, and the walls were covered with pamphlets, topographical maps, bulletin boards, and display cases. It was about twenty degrees warmer inside.

Two fresh-faced kids about Nicky's age were giggling over morning coffee at the reception desk. The girl was working there and the guy was hanging around, probably working overtime on a summer romance. When I came in they both flashed big, innocent smiles at me, as if they'd been caught doing something slightly naughty. When I asked to see the boss, she made the call on the intercom. The whole while her eyes danced gleefully between me and the boy. Young love. Or was it young lust? Their secret, which couldn't be

much of a secret to anyone who saw them together, was safe with me.

I looked through some of the displays while I waited. There were the usual pictures of all the native trees and animals and quite a selection of artifacts, dating mostly from the Gold Rush era: rusted hand tools, square cut nails, brittle leather harnesses, and wooden saddles. There was also a small section on the Maidu Indians. Nothing special: foggy photos of ancient wizened folks with sucked-in faces and dull eyes, and a few tools, arrowheads, a worn stone mortar and pestle. I made a note to kick around the boulders on my property for arrowheads. I knew there had been Indians living there at one time. One of the rocks behind the house is pockmarked with several round, smooth, fist-sized depressions. My realtor called it a grinding rock. The Indians had ground acorn meal on the rock for untold generations, she said. History, right in my own back yard.

After I'd spent a few minutes with the exhibits, Ranger Cockburn came out and sent the loitering boy outside with a single raise of his eyebrow. His receptionist blushed and busied herself with some papers while he led me back to his closet-sized office. Cockburn was about my age, with a military air: close-

cropped hair, full uniform, all razor-sharp creases and spit and polish. He looked almost dashing, but I bet he didn't dash anywhere with what looked like a watermelon riding above his belt buckle. I must have stared at his stomach for a second too long because he tried to pull it in and that strained our subsequent conversation. He listened impassively as I stated my case.

"I'll tell you the same thing I told her mother," he said. "Nicky was a good worker. But one day she took off, no warning, no notice, nothing. I'll miss her, but we'll get by. This sort of thing happens once or twice every summer."

"You have people disappearing from here every year?"

"Mr. MacKenzie, they don't disappear, they quit. College kids get the idea that a summer in the Sierra is going to be great fun. Well, it is, but it's not summer camp, there's a lot of work to do and most of it isn't glamorous. Some of them can't take it: the hours, the cold, the tedium, the mosquitoes, the isolation, the lack of television, the separation from their family or their sweethearts . . . the list is endless."

"But it's not like Nicky just to disappear. If she was going to quit, she would have let me know, and she would have called her mother or me."

"Kids. You think you know them, but they surprise you."

Cockburn picked an imaginary piece of lint from his sleeve and carefully deposited it in the wastebasket before continuing. "I had one boy here two years ago who took off and no one heard from him for a month. His mother kicked up a fuss, and I had search parties combing the brush on both sides of the Sierra. He turned up in Reno dealing blackjack in one of the smaller clubs, found it much more stimulating, he said, although he did miss our clean air. It's an adventure for them, Mr. MacKenzie, that's all."

"I don't think so."

"You wait and see. Some of these kids get real spiritual, they like to wander around deep in the forest all alone, communing with nature. She'll turn up somewhere, maybe down in Yosemite, having hiked the Muir Trail."

"I'm not buying it, Cockburn. I know my niece too well."

"Mr. MacKenzie . . ."

"Did she have roommates? I want to talk to them."

Cockburn rolled his eyes, and hunched forward in his chair. We both knew I wasn't going to give up and sit around indefinitely waiting for Nicky to call. He ran his finger down and across a list taped in one corner of his desk blotter.

"She was in Cabin 4-C

with Smith-Smith."

"Where do I find them?"

"Them?"

"The Smiths."

"There's only one Smith-hyphen-Smith, thank God. She's working the mess hall for the next few weeks."

He gave me directions and I walked the winding gravel path through the trees to a clearing until my nose told me I was getting close. The crisp morning air blended deliciously with the aroma of a wood fire, coffee, and bacon.

But the mess hall was empty when I got there, except for the cook. I found him after I walked through the hall to the kitchen. A pale man in the harsh morning light, he wore a spattered white apron over an old white T-shirt and white cotton pants. He was fiftyish, with a full head of grey hair, bushy eyebrows, and a face devoid of all color except for the fine, intricate web of veins that spread just beneath the surface of the skin on his nose and cheeks. He was lighting one unfiltered cigarette from the stub of another as I came in. He eyed me impassively from under drooping lids and then hacked and wheezed a thirty second smoker's aria for me. That brought some color to his face and some phlegm to his throat.

"Now that we've got the preliminaries out of the way," I

started to say, but he waved me off and walked purposefully out the back door onto the open porch. I followed. He spent the next few minutes clearing his throat and spitting over the railing while I told him my name and what I wanted. He nodded wisely and pointed down the hill toward the trees. His voice was a cracked, hoarse whisper.

"Smitty wanders off every day after breakfast. . . . Just as well, she's not a lot of help. She'll be back in time to deliver the lunches, though, if you want to wait."

His eyes told me he didn't want me to wait, at least not in the kitchen. He probably had a bottle squirreled away and he didn't want to share it. I thanked him and trotted down the back steps. As I hit the ground, he began to cough again, his body racked by the spasm, his face cherry red.

"You ought to take care of that cough," I said.

"Aw, this is nothing ? . . must have been something I ate."

I headed down the hillside toward the trees and Miss "Smitty" Smith-Smith.

**T**he path was lightly traveled, and as I descended, it narrowed to a single dusty track. It was really more of an animal run than a hiking trail. The vegetation was

low and thick and hung over the trail. It was cool and quiet, and when I stopped crashing through the brush I could hear the gurgle of running water somewhere below.

I found her by the stream. Smith-Smith was about Nicky's age, had a pale but attractive face, and was anorectically underweight—"aesthetically thin" might be a more polite way to say it. She was stretched out above me on a large flat rock that lay inclined toward the morning sun. Her kitchen apron was rolled and placed beneath her head as a pillow. Her eyes were closed and her face had a calm, somewhat bemused look to it. She might have been sleeping, or she might have been dead. I couldn't be sure that she was breathing.

"Hello," I said tentatively. I didn't want to scare her if she was alive.

She slowly cocked one eye open and spent a while examining me before she opened the other eye. She sat up and stretched lazily.

"I hope I didn't startle you," I said.

"Not at all, I've been expecting you... well, not you specifically, but someone."

"Oh?"

"Well, the noise. You didn't exactly sneak up on me. I can tell you're not a hunter, that's one thing in your favor. If you

were a hunter, you'd never corner anything but deaf animals. Listen. You've even scared the birds away."

She looked up and scanned the trees. She was right, the only sound was the rush of the stream at my feet. She closed her eyes, no doubt feeling the warmth of the sun on her lightly freckled skin.

"Can you feel the resonance of this rock?" she asked. "This is home for me, I've been here once before, you know. My people roamed this land for ages—long, long ago."

"Are you Smitty?" I asked, trying not to sound impatient.

"Up there I am," she said, pointing toward the kitchen. "And at home I'm Alexandra Mayfield Smith-Smith. But here in the forest," she said with an air of mystery, "I am... Chandra. Call me Chandra, if you must call me anything at all."

Chandra it was. No use continuing the stutter-step on her last name. She listened with exaggerated patience as I told her who I was and what I wanted. When I finished, she smiled to herself and took a long time composing her answer.

"I knew this would happen. I always know. I told her."

"What did you tell her?"

"That Woody was wrong for her. That this was all wrong for

her. But she wouldn't listen."

"Who is Woody, her boyfriend? And what's wrong with him?" I asked.

"Well, Woody would be the last person able to answer that question. I'm sure even he doesn't know. He's one of those dim, straightforward types, very literal-minded, very precise."

"An accountant?"

"Of course not. He's more of an overgrown Boy Scout."

"Does he have a last name?"

"Don't we all?" she asked wistfully.

"And Woody's last name is . . . ?"

"Rhodes. Woody Rhodes," she pouted.

"Any idea where I could find him?"

She drew herself up and sat very still with eyes closed.

"I sense his naive energy emanating from the Desolation Peak Trail area," she nodded.

"Sure of that?"

"Absolutely. He's been working there all summer."

I had no idea where Desolation Peak was but I doubted the reliability of any directions Chandra Smith-Smith might give me. I left her sunning like a loony lizard on her vibrating ancestral rock. Someone at the ranger station could help me look up directions.

She did tell me when she had last seen Nicky; it had been the morning before the full moon,

but she didn't know what day it had been. The full moon . . . that made two things that needed looking up.

**D**esolation Trail is a thirty minute drive from the ranger station. Ranger Cockburn had given me a Forest Service map and circled the general area where Woody Rhodes was working. He told me that this was Woody's second summer in the intern program. Apparently there were few repeaters, since the pay was so low, and those that did come back were really interested in the work, likely candidates for permanent Forest Service posting in the future. Cockburn betrayed some affection for Woody when he spoke, possibly seeing in him the budding promise of a fellow civil servant.

When I arrived at the trailhead, I gauged the direction of the sun and shadows and parked my truck where I estimated the shade would be in an hour. I noticed that my gas was down to less than a quarter tank and I made a mental note to take care of that soon. I set off down the trail in search of Woody Rhodes.

The trail was wide and well graded, and I passed a number of wheelchair patients and older folks in aluminum walkers who were out enjoying the scenery.

I recalled seeing a sign that indicated this trail was safe for the handicapped. But after fifteen minutes of uphill walking at an elevation of six thousand feet, I knew that the handicapped included me. I paused at a stone bench and admired the panoramic Sierra views while I caught my breath.

I continued on to Vista Point where a fairly large crowd had gathered around the stone and metal marker that held a bas-relief mockup identifying the various peaks and valleys to be seen in the distance. I thought I saw my man beyond the quarter-a-peek telescopes anchored in the retaining wall. He was gazing out there with a thousand mile stare, oblivious to the commotion around him.

In profile he had the strong jaw and clean-cut good looks that reminded me of another era—the man in those 1920's Arrow Shirt ads came to mind. He wore a crisp, clean uniform and a flat-brimmed hat like those affected by some highway patrolman, forest rangers, and Smokey the Bear. As I drew closer I could see that the uniform was of his own design, but it had an official look to it. As a Forest Service intern I guessed he wasn't permitted to use the real thing. A whistle dangled from a woven leather lanyard around his neck and a brass nametag that said "W. Rhodes"

was pinned above his breast pocket. His mind was miles away. From the looks of him I'd have guessed he was thinking about his greyhaired mother sitting in her cosy house, wearing a floral print dress and waiting for the fresh apple pies to cool on the windowsill.

It took me quite awhile to get his attention. I finally had to touch his arm, he was that deep in thought. He drew himself up immediately into a modified "parade rest" stance and listened politely as I told him my name and how Cockburn had directed me to him. When I mentioned Nicky's name, it was as if I'd slapped him in the face and turned his backbone to rubber in one quick motion. His cheeks reddened and he hung his head briefly before he caught himself and straightened up.

"What happened between you and Nicky? Her mother is worried, and I'm getting worried. And don't tell me that nothing happened. The way you telegraph your emotions you'd make a terrible liar and an even worse poker player."

"I don't gamble, Mr. MacKenzie, and I'm really sorry, about everything. I wish she could come back and give me another chance."

"Why, what happened?"

"Well, I'm just not very good with women."

I thought, the way you look,



Woody, you don't have to be good, you just have to be breathing and reasonably clean. The girls will come running.

"Tell me about it," was what I said.

"There's really not much to tell."

"There's more than you've told me so far."

"I really liked Nicky, Mr. MacKenzie. We had a lot in common, enjoyed the same things. We ate all our meals together, and even liked and disliked the same foods. We had the same days off, too, and we'd hike into the back country, really roughing it, like the pioneers. We'd sleep out in the open and fall asleep counting shooting stars."

"You were sleeping with her?"

"Yes, I mean, no, not the way you mean. We each had our own sleeping bag and we were next to each other. But nothing happened, I swear it."

"Relax, Woody, I'm not here as an irate uncle. Like I told you, I'm trying to find Nicky."

"That's the odd part. One day last week I was running late and missed meeting Nicky for dinner at the mess hall. I really wanted to see her because we'd argued the night before and I'd been worried about it all day. So I dropped by her cabin, but she wasn't in and her roommate said she hadn't seen her."

"That would be the mysterious Chandra?"

"Chandra? Oh sure, her roommate. She said Nicky had been upset about our argument and blamed me."

"What did you and Nicky argue about?"

"It didn't make much sense, and I still think I'm right. We picked up a few arrowheads along the stream while we were hiking and about the same time we came across a grinding rock with three fairly deep holes in it. The topography made it an ideal site for a long-term Indian camp, but I couldn't remember its being on the list."

"The list?"

"There are almost eighteen hundred Indian sites, and a few white pioneer sites located within the national forest, all documented. The list isn't available to the general public, it's for official uses. The Forest Service tries to monitor the sites, to keep the souvenir hunters out, but we're light on manpower. I happened onto one remote pioneer cemetery last summer and nearly fell into an open pit. The grave markers were still there, but every single body had been dug up."

"Why?"

"Ranger Cockburn said the pioneers used to bury their dead with dimes on their eyes. A couple of hundred and twenty-five-year-old coins is enough reason

for some folk. We call 'em pot-hunters, but they go after other things, too . . . coins, bones, you name it. Anyway, I wanted to let Ranger Cockburn know about the new site, so we could monitor it and maybe even schedule a preliminary excavation of the area. But Nicky was violently opposed. She didn't want me to tell anyone."

"I would have thought she'd welcome the opportunity. She majored in archaeology for a short time."

"I know, that's what had me puzzled. Anyway, we argued about it. I said it was in the interest of science, and she called me a grave robber. How would I like it, she said, if someone dug up my Great-aunt Tilly's bones, stole the wedding band off her hand, and put her skull in a museum display case for everyone to gawk at?"

"Nicky was never one to understate the case."

"I told her this could mean a lot to my career, get it started right. She told me that no one had a right to disturb the dead, and then she glared at me and left. That's the last time I saw her."

"And you have no idea where she went?"

"No, sir. And the funny thing is, she didn't take her clothes or books with her when she left."

"She didn't take anything?"

"Well, I never had an inventory list. You could check with Ranger Cockburn. I think he has her things in storage now."

I thanked Woody for his help, and he promised to ask around about Nicky some more. But it sounded as if he'd already made the rounds.

Unfortunately, the sun hadn't shifted quite the way I had predicted it would, and the truck's interior was like an oven—the steering wheel was sizzling. When things cooled down, I drove back to the ranger station and tried to think who else might be privy to Nicky's travel plans, but I didn't know all the players. For example, who did she work with every day? I knew her job hadn't been glamorous; in fact it was difficult and dirty. She was part of a two-person crew that maintained drainage ditches and dug septic line trenches for a series of new restrooms that would dot part of the Forest Service's wilderness trail. Of course they used backhoes and other mechanized trenching equipment, but I don't know if I'd have done it, even at her age. The job alone could easily have made her take a final hike.

Cockburn was out when I got to the station, and the giggling girl at the reception desk didn't have the authority to let me see

Nicky's things. Her boyfriend was still hanging around—he seemed to have the best summer job of anyone. When I asked who Nicky's work partner had been, she didn't know, but he did. It was Duffy Wade. The boyfriend even knew that this was Duffy's day off and that he usually spent time at his brother's place, not too far away.

Duffy Wade's place was a phoneless trailer parked deep in the woods. The boyfriend said he'd dropped Duffy off on the highway near there once, and he gave me some general directions.

I was glad my truck had four-wheel drive. The dirt road was rutted and eroded, and very steep. It seemed more like a dry streambed than a road. It dead-ended in a rocky clearing about a mile from the county road. The trailer was tiny and ancient and covered with fine red clay dust. It sat against a pair of huge cleft boulders on the edge of a large, harsh circle hacked from the surrounding forest. Its metal siding glared dully in the early afternoon sun, and bits of paper blew among the litter of cans and bottles on the ground. I approached slowly and tapped the horn. People who live this far out of the way usually don't like drop-in visitors.

But there was no sign of life inside the trailer, so I looked for

a shady area to park. The boulders cast the only shadow, so I pulled up behind them out of view of the road, and maneuvered the truck between some conical mounds of loose dirt. Bullet-riddled beer cans lay at the base of a tree at the edge of the clearing. I walked to the trailer and knocked lightly on the door, but no one answered. The handle was locked, but the latch hadn't engaged. I pushed the door open slowly.

Somebody messy lived there. The dark, cramped interior smelled like a moldy horse blanket that had been buried in the ground for a long time. Crumpled beer cans and dirty paper plates with the remains of days-old food were stacked in the tiny kitchen area. The bed seemed much used and was unmade. Every available inch of floor space was stacked to the ceiling with sturdy cardboard boxes. I peeked into one of the boxes. Rocks . . . it was full of rocks, and so was the second one, and the third. I hefted one of the rocks in my hand. It was oblong and smooth, about six inches long from end to end. It felt heavy and cool in my hand. There must have been fifty boxes full of rocks. That was a lot of extra weight for such a tiny trailer. I was surprised the tires hadn't blown out. Why rocks?

I lifted the lid of another box just to make sure, but this time

it wasn't rocks. It was tiny, lightweight stuff, projectile points, beadwork made from some kind of shells, some blobby pieces of colored glass, a few pieces of woven baskets, and what looked like bone fragments, all heaped together in a jumble. Everything smelled musty and damp.

Then something under the bed caught my eye. Bright colors. A red backpack sagged in the corner. Nicky's? No, I told myself, there must be a thousand red backpacks within fifty miles of here. Still, I yanked it out from under the bed in anticipation, turning it over and over in my hands, making the contents rattle. My stomach tensed—there was her name, underneath the flap, neatly lettered in indelible ink. This was Nicky's pack. She had been here, but why?

I stepped out of the dank trailer and back into the sunlight, Nicky's limp backpack in my hand. Absentmindedly I flipped it open and glanced inside. Two human skulls peered out at me with sooty, hollow-socketed stares. Unless Nicky had decided to bone up on *Hamlet* with some very realistic stage props, these were the real thing. They didn't look like anyone I knew, the bones looked burnt, but I had little time to wonder about that.

I heard the gravel popping

under the tires of an approaching car. Since I wasn't the man of this strange house, I decided not to wait in the doorway to greet whoever might be calling. I tossed the pack under the bed, closed the door, and trotted around back, concealed behind the boulders in the shade near my truck . . . with no way out.

The vehicle was an old one, from the sound of it. Its engine wheezed and whined as it struggled up the hill. As it squealed to a stop, a cloud of dust blew over the top of the boulders toward me. Doors slammed, voices . . . two male voices. They sounded loose and loud, the way people do when they are out in the country and think no one can hear them. They had no idea I was there. I scrambled up the boulder and carefully peeked over the edge for a look.

Two skinny, rawboned men, boys really, eighteen or nineteen, were drinking beer and loading the boxes into a small grey van. They worked methodically, pausing for a new beer after every few boxes. They looked as if they could be brothers. The bigger one seemed angry about something that was probably the smaller one's fault.

"If you hadn't screwed up," the big one said, "we wouldn't have to unload this stuff all at once."

"Okay, I screwed up," said

the little one hostilely. "How many times are you going to remind me?"

"Hey, chill out, Duffy. It's all taken care of. That Maidu maid ain't going to bother nobody, never. And with this stuff gone that Boy Scout can't nail us—it's like the whole thing never happened."

"Geez, I wish she had minded her own business."

"But she didn't," the big one laughed sarcastically, "and now she's got what she wanted. After the next rain, her precious burial mound looks like nobody ever touched it. Too bad she won't be there to appreciate it."

Duffy got a sour look on his face, as if he didn't want to think about it. He tossed the final box into the van and slammed the rear doors shut.

"Let's go, Dooley. We've got to be there by five P.M. Move it!"

Dooley hopped down from the trailer, clutching Nicky's backpack in his hand.

"You almost forgot this, dummy. If your head wasn't screwed on . . ."

"Knock it off!"

"Hey, Duffy, it don't matter if you do lose your head. We've got two spares in here."

"Not funny. We can toss the pack over the side on the way to Reno."

"Don't forget to empty it first. And save those skulls! They're going to be a bigger payday

than the rest of these 'artifacts' put together. And you were going to leave it in the trailer."

The brothers glared at each other for a moment, and then Duffy shrugged and got into the van. The big one, Dooley, stared after him.

"I don't know why you're so tense. They can't arrest us for hauling this stuff. They gotta catch us in the act of digging it up. You dig?"

Dooley dodged as an empty beer can sailed by his head, then he laughed, got in, started the engine, and gunned it a few times. Then he got out again, and urinated in loopy circles against the only tree in the clearing. Satisfied with his artistry, he hopped back in and they drove away.

They had to have been talking about Nicky. Her backpack was in their trailer, and those were Indian artifacts they were hauling. I couldn't imagine her spending any time with them voluntarily. As I scrambled down, I realized that all the loose mounds of dirt surrounding my truck were the aftermath of a sifting operation. Sure enough, a crude rocker with a wire screen was resting off to one side. The Wade brothers were illegally excavating Maidu burial sites and hauling the dirt back here to be sifted.

I had to follow them to find Nicky, but I took my time.

Their old van moved slowly, and I didn't want to show up in their rear view mirrors while we were still on the dirt road. They said they were headed to Reno and there was only one way to get there: Highway 80. It would be easier to tail them on the highway without drawing attention to myself.

It took me longer than I thought it would, but I finally caught sight of them near the summit. From that point on, the interstate takes a long curving slide down the eastern slope of the Sierra to the state line and Reno. Highway 80 is only two lanes wide in either direction along this stretch, and the land falls away dramatically beyond the guard rail. Loaded eighteen-wheelers roar along the center lane, blasting their horns, trying to save their brakes. Duffy and Dooley Wade were in the right lane, holding a strict fifty-five miles per hour to avoid being pulled over for speeding, so I locked my cruise control in step behind them. They even slowed down some more as we passed an ill-fated tourist receiving a citation from the highway patrol.

My mind was racing. They had Indian artifacts, stolen goods, ghoulish contraband. Nicky's backpack had been in their trailer, and Duffy Wade had worked with her digging ditches, leach lines, and

trenches . . . and an occasional Maidu burial mound. A clumsy backhoe would destroy half the artifacts it unearthed, hardly a sound archaeological practice . . . if any archaeological interests were involved, which I doubted. There were some very unscientific folks who would pay well for pirated artifacts. Had Nicky discovered the boys' scheme and had they kidnapped her? Maybe they would lead me to her. Dooley's triple negative played back in my head: "That Maidu maid ain't going to bother nobody, never." Never?

A dashboard warning light flicked on, indicating my gas tank was dangerously low on fuel. Damn! And I knew my truck well enough to know that the light was serious. I had less than ten minutes before the tank ran dry. There was no way I could pull off the highway, refuel, and be sure that I would catch up with them. If they hit Reno without me, I'd never find them. At least not while they had the goods on them. And without the goods, I'd have no leverage.

I had one chance. Loaded semi-trucks and speeding sports cars continued to careen by us down the mountainside. I nosed out into the center lane, passed the van, and pulled back in front of them at a reasonable distance. In my rear view mir-

ror I could see the boys. Dooley driving and sipping furtively on yet another beer, Duffy staring sullenly out of the passenger-side window. There was a spectacular view where the hillside dropped away, but he didn't appear to be enjoying it. I slackened my speed and the van slowly closed the gap between us. After a few minutes of this, Dooley started to get antsy, alternately cussing at me and glancing around at the traffic behind us.

By now we were going forty miles per hour, too slow for the van to safely merge into the faster traffic. Dooley honked at me, waving me over to the shoulder, but I just waved back at him, downshifted, and continued to decelerate. Other cars went by, their passengers giving me signs of ill will as they passed. If only they knew the truth.

Finally there was a break in traffic and Dooley pulled out to pass. I pulled over to cut him off. He cut back. I braked hard. Our bumpers locked and my truck seemed to surge toward the steel guard rail. I stood on the brakes and tried to control the truck.

We screeched and scraped along the guard rail, then there was the sound of metal ripping loose and suddenly I felt lighter, drifting free. I kept the truck near the railing and eventually

braked to a halt. Apparently the edge of the van's bumper had caught on the railing, ripping us apart and spinning the van a hundred and eighty degrees so that it came to a halt facing the oncoming traffic, back doors swinging open.

I pried my fingers off the steering wheel and wondered what I was going to do next. The front doors of the van flew open and the Wade brothers staggered out, shaken. They checked out the damage and then eyed me. Dooley was ready for blood.

The eighteen-wheelers continued to race by. They couldn't have stopped if they'd wanted to. It was me and the Wades on the side of the road. My engine used up the last drop of gas and died just as Dooley put his hand on my door handle.

And then he took it away. Duffy was yelling at him. The highway patrol had pulled up near the van. It was the first time I'd ever been glad to see a black and white.

**T**he scene by the side of the highway was wild. The Wades accused me of reckless driving, and I accused them of grave robbing, kidnap, and possibly murder. When I tried to get to one of the boxes in the van to make a point, Dooley took a swing at me, but Duffy deflected it. Then



he took a swing at Duffy and almost hit the patrolman.

The patrolman handcuffed Dooley and that seemed to calm him down. Then he called for a backup unit and ran us all through a series of sobriety tests. He didn't know who to believe. Another CHP cruiser pulled up. The Wades watched me morosely. They were stuck, there was no place to run.

I spent the next few hours in the highway patrol offices where a series of phone calls confirmed parts of my story with Ranger Cockburn. Cockburn wasn't about to hustle his bureaucratic bottom over the pass at night, but he promised to take a look at the artifacts in the morning. Dooley and Duffy Wade were transferred to the Vato County sheriff's department jail in Truckee. They were both booked for investigation of felony excavation and removal of archaeological resources—a charge that would probably be dropped—but there was still “driving under the influence,” and an assault kicker for Dooley. It didn't look as if they had much chance of making bail immediately, and Duffy looked frightened by the prospect of jail. I couldn't blame him for that. But they both remained tightlipped about Nicky.

My truck, badly damaged but

serviceable, had been towed to the county yard. After I paid the charges, I was free to go. But where could I go? Nicky was still missing, and the Wades knew something about it. I spent a sleepless night in a noisy motel room just off the main drag in Truckee and marked the hours until Cockburn arrived.

In the morning, Cockburn reviewed the contents of the boxes. He was amazed by the extent of the collection and embarrassed that so many gravesites under his protection had been looted so brazenly.

“Nicky came to me last week with a story about Duffy Wade looting burial mounds, but she offered no proof.”

“Did you check it out?”

“I called Wade in and asked him point blank. He denied it. He said Nicky and he were romantically involved and had a little tiff. He said she was trying to be vengeful.”

“And you believed him?”

“Sure, that sort of thing has happened before. Kids, they're hard to figure.”

“But Nicky was telling the truth.”

“It certainly looks that way, Mr. MacKenzie.”

Cockburn was a frustrating man, I was getting irritated. I knew that a short fuse was a family trait that Nicky and I shared. Faced with Cockburn's

complacency, she probably marched off in search of some hard evidence to stick up his nose. And ran into the Wade brothers.

Cockburn got permission to interview Duffy Wade about the locations of the burial mounds. He wanted to reseal them to prevent any further damage. I doubted that Duffy would cooperate. It would amount to an admission of guilt. I got permission to tag along to see how it would go.

Duffy had not had a restful night in jail. A new purple bruise had swollen his left eye shut, and his nose was taped in place. I'm not a dental expert, but it looked as if he'd also chipped some teeth. The injuries weren't there last night when I'd left him. He looked haggard and worn. There was no bluff left in this tough guy.

Cockburn spread out a map of the area where Duffy and Nicky had been working for the last few weeks. It charted half a dozen Indian artifact sites. At first Duffy refused to help, but I told him that any cooperation he gave might work in his favor. I was a regular jailhouse lawyer. Reluctantly, he agreed to look at the map, but he said very little.

Most of the "treasures" appeared to have come from a single mound, according to

Cockburn. The local Maidu burned their dead and had annual mourning ceremonies at the same site, where they then burned offerings of clothing, beadwork, and food. That explained all the blobby pieces of glass—melted-down beads. I theorized that Duffy and his brother had ripped open several more and hadn't had time to get to the rest. Nicky had caught on.

"What about Nicky?" I asked.

Duffy's good eye looked away. "It wasn't my idea," he said.

"What?"

"I said, it wasn't my idea. But Dooley can be a crazy man, you know. And she wouldn't give up."

The sad story spilled out. Nicky, frustrated by Cockburn's indifference and at odds with Woody Rhodes, by herself traced Duffy back to the trailer one evening the week before. She had discovered the boxes, much the way I had, while Duffy was in back, sifting his latest load. Dooley rolled in suddenly and surprised her. Duffy kept insisting that it wasn't his fault, it wasn't his fault.

I shoved the map towards him. "Tell me where she is."

He stared at the map a long time before he straightened up and shook his head. "No way, man."

I met Woody Rhodes at the ranger station at dawn the next day. As we headed for the remote area where the Wade brothers had done their looting, I fought off the morbid images that flashed in my mind. They knew where she was, but they weren't saying. That could mean only one thing, she was dead. Why would they leave her alive to accuse them? But how could they kill my niece over a pile of forgotten bones? Woody sat in stoic silence beside me, pointing this way or that as we came to forks in the trail.

By noon we had covered all the known sites on the list. Most had been campsites, but a few had been burial grounds. "Blown sites" was what Woody called them. Ragged trenches yawned where Indian bones had rested for centuries, ripped from their slumber by cold metal jaws. Indiscriminate, heavy-handed pillaging. The final desecration was the crumpled beer cans that littered the bottom of each trench. But no sign of Nicky, no shallow grave, no farewell note. What made me think I had a Chinaman's chance of finding her in hundreds of thousands of acres of Tahoe Forest? But I had to keep going.

"The way Duffy stared at the map last night, I'm sure she's out here somewhere, and I'm not going to leave her here. Are you sure this is the last one?"

"It's the last one on the map, Mr. MacKenzie. I'm sorry."

"But you and Nicky discovered a new one on your hike, only last week. How complete can that list be? There's got to be another site around here."

Woody looked at me skeptically, but studied the map again and scrambled up a rock outcropping to get his bearings and scan the area.

"We could try over there, the topography's right," he said, pointing toward a ridge to the southeast.

It was tough going, and we parked the truck near the base of the hill and followed the steep streambed on foot along a meandering game trail. A trickle of water gurgled through the rocks even now in late summer. I paused to catch my breath while Woody forged on ahead. The forest was silent, there were no signs of heavy machinery, no human footprints on the trail, no sound except the wind in the trees. I was out of breath and losing hope.

"Hey, Mr. MacKenzie! Up here! You were right, there was a campsite here. A big one, too."

I doubletimed it to the top and joined Woody, who stood beaming in the center of another ravaged Indian campsite.

"Close to water, southern exposure—a perfect campsite!" he declared.

But not perfectly neat. The

looters had come over the hill from the other side and had ripped up a large area between the trees. The site looked as if it had been attacked by a giant gopher. But still no sign of Nicky.

We kicked around the site for half an hour until I noticed an irregular plow-like shallow groove leading downhill away from the site and in the opposite direction of the path blazed by the earth-moving equipment. I followed the groove into the trees. Some saplings were bent, and the bark on some of the large trees was scuffed and scraped as if a heavy object had rolled or been dragged through there recently. I hurried on downward toward the stream.

And there she lay, next to the burbling water, like a bruised and battered doll, chained and padlocked to a jawlike backhoe bucket that easily outweighed her. She was a mess and barely conscious, but she was alive.

The rest is mostly good news.

Nicky has recovered for the most part, and she's kept off those extra pounds she claims she had before her ordeal. She took a semester off from school to sort things out. There are still some things she won't talk about even with her mother, and occasionally she bursts into tears for no apparent reason. But that's happening less often as time goes on. She was in good spirits the last time I spoke with her.

There was enough evidence to prosecute the Wade brothers on a variety of charges, but in my view, criminal penalties and true justice rarely coincide. Brighter minds than mine have tried to tackle that subject and have fallen short.

And to Cockburn's credit, he gave the bones and other artifacts to a Maidu representative for a ceremonial reburial somewhere in the Tahoe Forest. Now those long-forgotten people can rest again as an anonymous part of the land they knew and used so long ago.

FICTION



# Father Hugh and the Deadly Scythe

by Mary Monica Pulver

Illustration by Glenn Wolff

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**T**he man's death was no accident, that was clear from the first report, given by an ashen-faced Austin, our steward's assistant. Austin had been on his way to Deerfield village to remind our reeve that tomorrow the women were required in the meadow to rake the hay the men cut today when he saw the body in the ditch.

"Still warm he was," gasped Austin, wiping his broad face with his hand, "but with all the blood drained out of him, his arm off at the elbow and his throat open to heaven like a mouth screaming for vengeance."

Austin, for all his low birth, had a taste for a fancy turn of speech, acquired from our steward, the indispensable John Freemantle.

"Where is John?" I asked.

"Gone to Banbury, to buy that ambling mare Will Frazee has for sale."

"Oh, that's right." In my excitement I had forgotten. "Has the hue and cry been raised?"

"Yes, madam. There's blood all along the edge of the fallow field where I found him, great smears, like he was chased down—" Austin stopped, goggling at the memory, wiped at his sweating face, then staggered and would have fallen if Sister Harley had not pushed

a stool under him as he went down. We were in my quarters in the cloister where Austin had come with the horrible news.

"You're sure it's Frick Cotter lying dead?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, madam," muttered Austin, pushing a hand through his heavy mat of auburn hair. "There's no mistaking that nose."

Frick was a familiar figure in the village. He owned no strips in the three big fields around it, and his cottage was one of the humblest. But he kept body and soul together by means honest and less so, hiring himself out for odd jobs, growing peas and beans in the tiny garden behind his cottage, collecting and selling wood from the forest, poaching the occasional rabbit or stealing an egg.

But his main occupation was gossip. For all they talk about women's tongues going on wheels, there was none so quick to sniff out a tale or spread it to every ear as Frick. And as if to advertise his failing, he was the owner of the biggest nose in all Oxfordshire.

"Still, poor old Frick," sighed Sister Harley, handing Austin a drink of wine—in my good silver chalice, I noticed; but I said nothing. She had seen Austin's need and taken the first cup at hand, which was

fine; Austin was a good man.

She touched a long, slender finger to her long, slender nose. "I wonder what story he told to bring this on himself?"

"What do you mean?"

"Murder, of course."

"Surely it was a robbery," I objected. "After all, he was out of the village and on the high road."

"Rob old Frick?" she said.

"Of what? He's one of the poorest men for miles around."

"But a highway robber, a stranger to these parts, might not know that," I said.

"You had only to look at Frick to know he was very poor," she said. "No, it was someone driven to fury by Frick's tongue."

"Anyway," said Austin, "it wasn't a knife did this, but something bigger. A sword, maybe."

"Sword?" Sister Harley turned her aristocratic face to Austin. "But no one in the village has a sword."

"Nor the ordinary robber," added Austin. "By the cut, the blade was fresh and keen, not some chipped and dulled castoff the robber generally carries. This blade would be swung from a noble hand."

An ugly silence fell in the room. That could only mean Ranulf Fitzralph. England in these unhappy times needs a

strong man to lead her, but our Henry VI was made of straw. Local bullies rose and everywhere defied the helpless law. Our local bully was Lord Ranulf. Rich and with friends at court, he took what he wanted and none dared gainsay him. From what we all knew of him, it was not beyond reason that he might amuse himself by killing a villein.

"But this means he's gone too far at last," I said. "Sister Harley, send word that I want to see John Freemantle the instant he returns. We will send him to the sheriff and then with a letter to the bishop." For Ranulf would defy the sheriff, defy even the king; but no man would dare defy the Church. And this was Church business; Frick Cotter, a lowly villein, was, like every villein in Deerfield village, the property of Deerfield Abbey. By killing him, Lord Ranulf now found himself at the mercy of not just me, as abbess, or even the bishop, but the church itself, Vicar of Christ on earth.

It was two hours later that the abbey Mass priest, Father Hugh of Paddington, asked to see me. He is a small brown fellow, rather common, but he knows the ways of the village, and said he had some information about Frick Cotter to impart.



"My lady," he said from his humble kneeling position, "I am most distressed to report that Frick Cotter was murdered by someone in the village."

"Nay, Master Hugh; Austin reports the wounds on the body would indicate a sword killed him. We need look no further than Sir Ranulf for the doer of this wickedness. I will send John for the sheriff to come and arrest him, and will inform the bishop of the unhappy details of this matter."

Father Hugh rose—the floor of my quarters is tile, nearly as hard as stone, so I require no one to remain kneeling long—and said, "Ah, I wish it were that easy. But I have seen men done to death by the sword, and a closer look at Frick's body tells a different tale."

I would have argued with him about this, but recalled that he had in truth seen men injured in battle while Austin had not. I asked instead, "What weapon do you think did this, if not a sword?"

"A billhook, perhaps. But I think it was more likely a scythe."

The workers in the meadow that day had been using scythes. I had heard some of them whistling merrily as they departed along the road home about half an hour before Austin left for

the village—to find Frick's body, freshly killed.

"No, surely not," I said. "I would not believe one of our own villeins could do a murder." Especially when I had my heart so firmly settled on at last ridding the area of Lord Ranulf. "Who among them would do such a thing?"

The little priest shrugged. "I believe, my lady, that old Frick's gossiping ways have indeed caught up with him."

I stared at him. "Then you know who it was?"

"No, no, not yet. But it appears Frick was not such a gossip as we thought. That is, for a price, he would not tell all that he knew."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he would go to someone whose secret he had discovered, and say that for two cabbages, or a loaf of bread, or a chicken, he would not tell anyone that this someone had feigned sickness to get out of his boonwork plowing in the abbey fields."

"Who feigned sickness?" I demanded.

"No one, madam," replied Hugh, not covering in time the smile tweaking his mouth; "I but used that as an example. But I have learned two secrets Frick knew about, and there may be a third. It's near Vespers now, too late to continue

my search. But with your leave, I will go back in the morning and see what more there is to learn about Frick's little enterprise."

"You truly think it was one of these two who killed Frick, to keep their secret from being told?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps it was another, whose secret I don't as yet know."

"But if you can't discover all the secrets, how will you know who did this wicked thing?"

"Madam, I shall trust God to show me the truth."

I said very well and dismissed him, thinking Father Hugh a very unlikely sort of vehicle for trusting in. He is popular among our villeins, who find him more approachable than their own priest, but that's because he is shabby, clumsy, and unlearned just like them.

The next day Father Hugh came to me about mid-afternoon with a report. I summoned Sister Mildred, in charge of lay labor, and Sister Harley, my chaplain, to hear it with me.

"I feel there are but three men who might have done this deed," said Father Hugh. "One is Jack Strong. He's the fellow who claimed a bit of waste near the forest and fenced it and has been raising parsnips in it this year. And fertilizing the soil with the bones and other scraps

of the deer he and his son Will have been poaching."

"Jack Strong has been poaching deer?" said Sister Harley, surprised.

"Yes, of course he has," I interjected. "Sister Mildred told me about it months ago. He's only taken three in the past two years, and for all the hunting King Henry does, he'll not miss those few. Though if Jack takes another before winter, I'll have to warn him I know about it. Go on, Father Hugh."

"The second is Tiff Dickinson."

Sister Mildred said, "He's father to Christopher, madam, who ran away right after Michaelmas last year." Villeins may buy their freedom if they can save the money, or they may run away to a city, where, if they manage to survive a year and a day, they gain the status of citizen, making them free.

Christopher had taken this second choice, and was but two months from his year-day, if he had not starved to death, or gone to another manor and accepted anew the burden of villeinage for a bit of land and something to eat—or fallen victim to one of the diseases that infest the cities.

"Have you news of Christopher?" asked Sister Harley.

Father Hugh nodded. "Chris-

topher slips home to visit his family every so often. He was here just last Sunday."

"Why the fool," I said; "by leaving the city, he forfeits the time he's spent there, and must begin again. He ran to Oxford, I believe?" We could have sent men after him, but Christopher was a lazy lout from birth and it would be a waste of good labor to go after bad—and he would just have run again at first chance.

"Yes," nodded Father Hugh. "But he's finding it difficult to make a living. He comes home to be fed and to court Hob's daughter Megan."

"Does he now!" said Sister Mildred. "We'll have to put a stop to that. It's all very well for him to run off, we can easily spare him. But I'll not have him trying to steal away Megan."

I agreed; the girl was a talented weaver and a hard worker, a credit to her honorable family. "Besides, she's only fourteen." I frowned. "You don't think it was Christopher who set upon Frick?"

"No, Chris left Deerfield Sunday evening. But someone saw Frick speaking to Chris's father Tiff that morning as he was coming out to the meadow with his scythe, and said Tiff walked off with a face like a thundercloud. It may be that Frick saw Christopher during his last visit

and offered to keep the news from us, for a price."

"That wicked old eavesdropper, I wish God had struck him blind for a peeping Tom!" said Mildred.

"Yes, a blind snoop is much less dangerous than a sighted one," said Sister Harley. "And if God had struck, perhaps no mortal would have put his soul in danger by killing him. And then Frick might have gone to judgment from his bed, with a priest to shrive him, instead of leaping into eternity with his sins hot and smoking on him. God have mercy on us all, though He is a very mysterious Person." And we all crossed ourselves and hoped to die peacefully in our beds, properly shriven.

"I begin to see that my policy of keeping silent about transgressions among our villains is not a wise practice," I remarked. "Who is your third suspect, Father Hugh?"

"Evan Harmony. He's been . . . er, delving Eve, the blacksmith's wife. Or so Frick hinted to someone."

"Oh, my," I said. Our blacksmith, Toby, was typical of the breed, large and strong, but Toby also came equipped with a violent temper. Evan Harmony wasn't small or frail, but he was no match for the blacksmith. Killing Frick Cotter

might seem a small price to pay to avoid having Frick tell our blacksmith Evan had made a cuckold of him.

"Perhaps we should look at the blacksmith himself," I said. "If Frick went to Toby with his tale, Toby might have killed him to keep the news from spreading. Or if Toby didn't believe him, he might not take kindly to someone telling such tales about his wife."

But Father Hugh shook his head. "No, Toby is the sort who uses his hands or, at worst, reaches for his hammer. A scythe is an awkward weapon for someone not used to it. I think madam, ladies, our murderer is Tiff, Jack, or Evan."

"So which is it?" asked Sister Mildred.

Hugh lifted his shoulders. "I don't know," he said simply. "They came home separately, and no one saw them along the road. Jack has a bloodstained tunic in his house, but he says it's from the deer he poached—and there's almost half a deer hanging from the rafters in that shed behind his house. Tiff has a brand new haft on his scythe, but says he cracked it yesterday in the field and went home a little early to replace it. There are three witnesses who say he left the meadow early, but he told no one why he was leaving. Evan knocked Frick

down after Mass last Sunday and said if he ever caught him alone he'd kill him. Half the village saw and heard it—some cheered. Frick was not a popular person."

"But you don't know who actually killed him?" I asked.

"No, my lady. And I can't think of a way of finding out."

There the matter stood, and would stand, we thought. Then, late in the afternoon, Father Hugh sent word he would like me to come to the stables, as he was about to accuse the murderer.

"Did he say who it is?" I said, rising.

"Nay, madam," said Austin. "He's put on his best robe and is carrying the good processional cross, and talks as if he's looking for a sign from heaven. And he's sure enough of the results that he's sent for a beadle to detain the guilty party for your judgment."

Concerned, because I do not like anyone, most especially a priest, to trifle with signs—there is such a thing as getting more than you ask for—and angry with my little priest for rousing my concern, I left the cloister and went into the inner courtyard where I saw Sister Harley just coming out of the guest-house. I gestured to her to accompany me. We went out the double wooden doors that led to

the outer court with its barns, sheds, and smell of animal muck. The sunlight fell from a brazen sky through hot, still air. Good haying weather, Sister Mildred would have said.

She was there, part of a small gathering by the stables which also included our swineherd, a shepherd, a girl from the kitchen with a bowl of scraps for the chickens, a few others. I made note of their faces, for I would scold them later as idlers.

The three suspected villeins were standing beside the beadle with an air of being in custody. Jack Strong, the poacher, was a tallish man with broad shoulders and a lot of shaggy brown hair. Tiff of the runaway son was also strongly built, if not so tall, and there was a lot of gray in his dark hair and beard. Evan, as befits a lover, was the youngest, handsome for a villein, with a red mouth, pink cheeks, and eyes as gray as glass.

The beadle turned at our approach and reported gravely, "Father Hugh seems very sure he can tell us which of these three is the guilty one. He asked that they bring their scythes, which I made them do, but all three have been carefully cleaned."

"Yes, all scythes are cleaned after use," said Father Hugh from behind, making me start.

I hadn't heard him come up. "They are cleaned and sharpened and put away dry against the next use." He was, as reported, in his best new habit and dwarfed by the length of the fine gilt processional cross, which ought not to leave the cloister, especially to be dragged in the dirt of a barnyard.

"For a townsman you know a lot about farm tools," remarked Sister Harley. Father Hugh comes from a town near London.

"The villeins of Deerfield village are my people, too," replied Father Hugh. "I spend a certain amount of time in their company, and naturally I learn something of their ways. Even the wicked ones. Where are the scythes?"

"Over there by the stable door," replied the beadle.

Father Hugh squinted against the lowering sun, spied the scythes, and went for a closer look, not noticing the puddle of filth he was walking through, nor how the tail of his good habit dragged in it. (All his habits are too large for him; it is as if no tailor or seamstress can believe he is truly that small.) Then he looked at the three villeins standing beside Will and ordered, "Each one of you will come and stand beside his scythe."

The villeins looked at the

beadle, who nodded curtly, and each walked across the yard to stand behind his tool, facing Father Hugh and the rest of us. The beadle, frowning officiously, moved closer, but I stayed where I was with Sisters Harley and Mildred. As abbess I would have to punish the guilty one, but this inquest was man's business.

The ungainly weapons—for so the scythes appeared to me now—leaned against the wall in a row, each very like the other.

Father Hugh began pacing up and down the line, throwing each villein a sharp glance. "When God first made the world," he said in that measured tone he uses when beginning a sermon, "He chose Adam and Eve to be His stewards on earth. They were His creatures, who swore Him fealty. But then!" The little monk whirled and gestured sharply. "Came the *devil*—" he growled the word "*—and he tempted Eve, who foreswore her oath. She went to Adam, who wickedly abjured his on her advice. And therefore all the earth came under the devil's dominion, until our Lord Jesus came and bought it back with His blood, alleluia.*" Father Hugh was in full cry now. If there is one thing Father Hugh can do well, it is preach. His sermons are as racy

as any friar's. He raised a small hand in affected horror. "Yet, o yet, there are those who would still break the oath sworn for them at baptism and take livery and maintenance of—Beelzebub." He drew out the name with a hiss, and a little tremor ran through us all. "There is among you," he said, turning and pointing a small finger at the villeins, "one who serves *not* God but the devil! Who is so puffed up with *pride* and *anger* he cannot—even now that I know who he is—repent and confess his sin."

This made an uneasy stir among the trio, but none opened his mouth, even in protest.

"Do you know what Beelzebub means?" asked Father Hugh, and even I shook my head. "*Lord of the Flies*. The filthy fly, engendered in filth, drawn to filth all its life, a true blazon for the livery of its filthy lord, Beelzebub." His voice dropped on that last word and, fascinated, we all leaned forward a little to hear what he would say next.

"And here, in worship of their master, and in witness to the devil's human servant, the flies gather . . . on the weapon used to take the life of Frick Cotter!" Father Hugh pointed suddenly at the third scythe, the one belonging to Jack Strong, deer poacher.

Jack stared at his tool, then kicked at it until it fell, sending the flies in all directions. "Nay, see?" he cried. "Them flies gather where they wist, then go off and gather some'eres else. Thou cannot be blamin' me for where the flies land."

"Perhaps it is as you say," said Father Hugh. "Very well, all of you, wave the flies off, send them a good distance. Then we'll watch where they gather."

The villeins set to with a will, shouted and kicked at the dust and muck of the yard, flapping their tunics at the air, clearing a wide space around themselves and the scythes. Jack worked hardest, which was only natural, but even he was satisfied at last, and they came back and stood each in front of his scythe again. Now even I went closer to watch because it seemed to me Jack Strong was perfectly right; flies gather here, then there, then are gone, all to no purpose or understanding, unless there is a heap of filth to draw them.

But silence had scarce fallen when they were back, thicker than ever, clustering all along the sharp blade of Jack's scythe, especially near where it fastened to the handle. Their numbers were so great they made a buzz as loud as if from bees, but there is no honey to be gotten from these

worshippers of Beelzebub.

The other two men stared and crossed themselves, backing off to leave Jack by himself in front of the damning blade. Jack swung at the flies again, but half-heartedly, and watched them collect swiftly as before. He swallowed, then said, as if continuing a statement he had begun earlier, "He says he seen me with the deer, and wanted half to keep his mouth shut. Half! He couldn't eat half a deer, not if he sat in his cottage all day and night stuffing himself; it'd spoil before he ate a quarter of it. And anyway there wasn't a half left; I'd only a half to start with, bein' I'd gone shares with—" Jack stopped, wiped his mouth. "With someone else." His angry gaze moved to me. "We be not horses or oxen, mistress; we can't live on grass and roots, like." And continued, to Father Hugh, "With all the work of my own strips in the fields to do, and the bid-reaps and boon work for yon nuns, and trying to keep up that little patch we claimed from the waste, my family needs meat. Frick don't—*didn't*—need it, not the way he lays idle, and I told him so. I offered to share other of my harvest with him. But he laughs and wipes that nose of his and 'e says, 'Jack, bring half of that deer to me after dark tonight, or I tell what



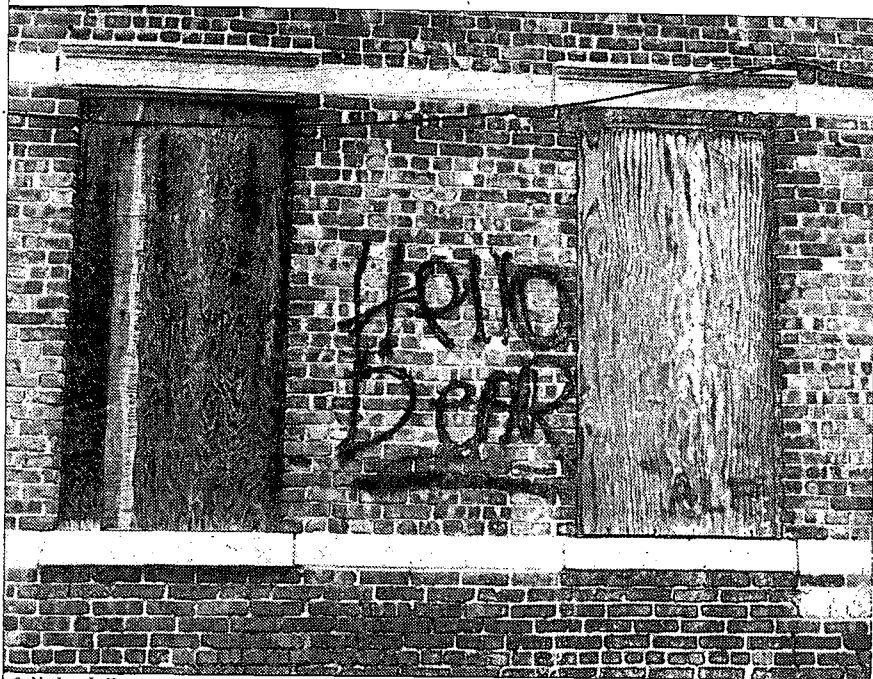
I know.' And I was so angry I just swung at him without thinkin', forgettin' like I was carryin' that scythe, and he flings up his arm and the blade takes it off like it was a stem of grass. I couldn't say who was the more surprised, him or me. But I'd started it then, and though he run I had to ketch him, and finish it, and so I did; and went home as if nothing had happened, and cleaned the blade with grass and dirt and washed it best I could and put it away. I meant to take it off the haft and put it in the fire tonight to rid it of the last of the blood—" He did stop then

and pointed at Father Hugh.

"You an' your Beelzebub! St. Mary, what a load of old codswallop! It was blood, that's all; it came like a fountain out of his arm, and his leg when I brought him down after I ketched up to him, and, and —I'm surprised there was any left to come out of his throat, though it did, like a fountain. It clings, does blood, and climbs into cracks, like. And it draws flies; anyone who's ever been to a butcherin' knows that. So you can take your Beelzebub and hang him—" He stopped and drew breath in a ragged sob. "Just like they'll do to me."

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The winning entry for the Winter Double Issue Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

# The Moonstone Earrings

by Herbert Resnicow

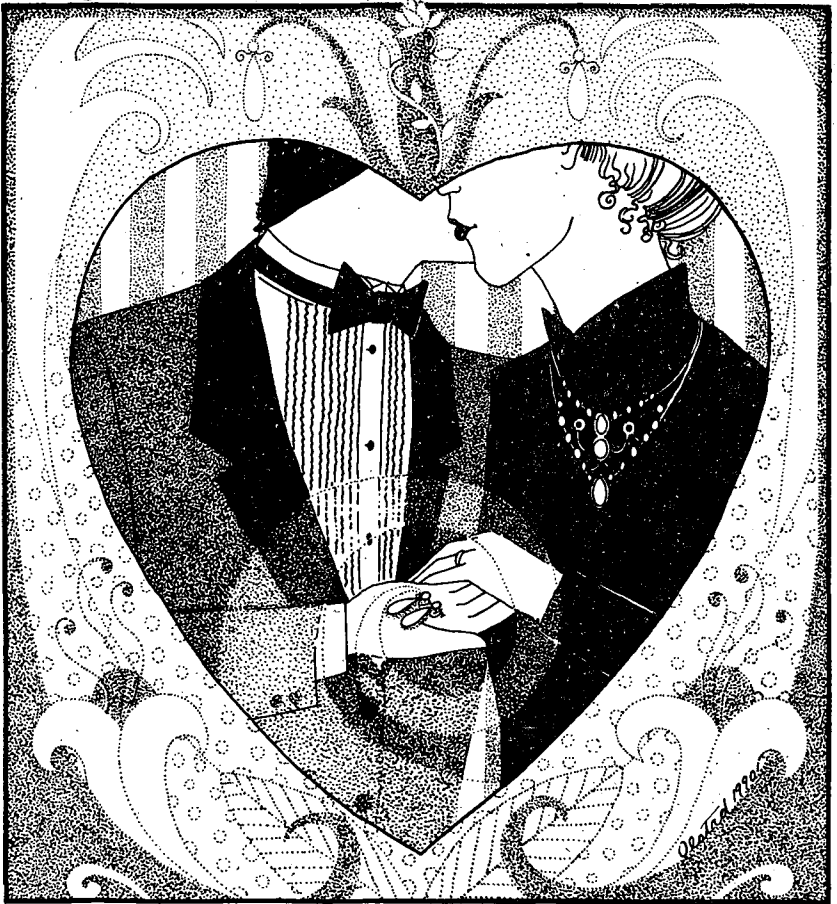


Illustration by Patricia Olstad

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I was in my pajamas, ready to settle down with a new whodunit—what else would I be doing on a Saturday night, no boy in Ethan Allen High would dare date me—my face covered with white goop guaranteed to remove all the freckles and make my skin like alabaster, when the phone rang. “Patsy, I need you desperately.” Angela Phillips sounded hysterical. “Please come to my house right away. *Please.*”

*Angela Phillips?* Who—even though she was only a soph, like me—was positively going to be voted Most Beautiful and maybe also—though not with me—Most Popular? Who had practically never spoken one word to me from kindergarten on? And who always referred to me, even when I was close enough to hear, as Carrots? Not just because of my name, Patricia Carin Campbell—I’m proud of it, like Mom said I should be—but because in the first grade I played a carrot in the class play and my hair sort of matched the costume. Not really “sort of”; more like exactly. Now I’m “Patsy,” huh? And *she* needs *me*? Boy, she had to be in real *big* trouble. “Why me?” I asked.

“You’re the only one who can help me.” She was almost crying. “Please, Patsy. *Hurry!*”

“What about Andy Besser?”

I asked. Andy was a shoo-in for Class Brain, but he was pretty stupid in other ways. Important ways. “He’s your date for tonight, isn’t he?” I don’t keep track of *everything* he does, only certain things.

“I absolutely *can’t* ask him, and you read all those detective stories, Patsy, and you’re so smart and strong and you can make people . . . Everybody *respects* you.”

Oh, great. Just what I wanted: Most Respected. It was more than a year ago that I turned fourteen, when Mom revoked her permission for me to play intramural football, but they still remembered what I was like. At that time Mom also got me dresses and heels. Even in sneakers I was taller than most of the boys, but did Mom listen? “They’ll soon outgrow you,” she swore. She even made me wear a bra, an A cup, which I definitely didn’t need then, and it ruined my life still further. Wearing clothes like that, I couldn’t kid around with the other jocks any more. In jeans and sneakers, it was okay to be one of the boys, but once I put on dresses and heels, even low ones, I was the opposition sex. The girls were even worse. To them I was practically a traitor.

“Andy Besser is even smarter than I am,” I pointed out, “and he reads whodunits too.” How

she ever got a boy as intelligent as Andy to date her, and as shy, I'll never know. I'd have to observe her more closely.

"I can't. He may be—uh—involvement." She said that last part as though . . . Could she be . . . ? And didn't know which boy . . . ? If that was it, why did she need me? What could I do? And why whodunits? Nope, it wasn't that.

"Why should I help you, Angela?" I asked. "I don't even like you." Probably the first time in her whole life anyone ever said that to her, and it felt real good to say it.

"I don't care." She was definitely hysterical. Everybody *had* to like Angela Phillips; it was her whole purpose in life.

"What do I get out of it?" Not that I'd ever go, but just to twist the knife. I'd never have a chance like this again.

"Just because everybody thinks my father is rich . . ." What a mind; she'd offer to go shopping with me next. "I have almost sixty dollars saved up that my father doesn't know about. You can have that."

I didn't want anything from her. We sure could use the money but—but suddenly I knew what to do. It was perfect. I could get what I really wanted and, at the same time, I could give Angela what she really deserved. Besides, I wanted to see how she was able to get

Andy Besser to date her on a Saturday night at her house, instead of going to see one of his favorite old detective movies. And sit in the tenth row, on the aisle. And eat popcorn. Not that I *always* checked; just enough to confirm the pattern. Besides, I liked old detective movies, too, though he didn't seem to notice that. I was also dying to find out what horrible thing Angela had done that only I could save her from. And that Andy was involved in.

"Get a pen and paper," I said, "and write what I tell you: 'I promise to give Patricia Carin Campbell, on demand, anything she wants, provided that she—' and fill in what you want me to accomplish. Sign it and date it."

Of course it could all be a very funny joke: Angela bet her friends that she could get me to run over to her house on a Saturday night. "She never has a date," I could hear her say, "so she'll be home for sure." If that was it, no problem. I'd just punch her head in, period. Andy's too, just for being there. And for being so stupid. And shy. He was an inch and a quarter taller than me now, but I was stronger and much better coordinated, so that would be no trouble. In fact, I'd enjoy doing it.

"Come in the back door," An-

gela said. "I'll be waiting in the kitchen. I don't want the others to see you." Well, hired help uses the service entrance, I guess.

"I'll be over in seven minutes," I said, and hung up. Hard. I got my jogging shoes and wiped the freckle cream off my face. It wouldn't have worked anyway; nothing I'd tried did. Once when I rinsed my hair blonde, so people would look at my hair instead of my freckles, I looked like the Bride of Frankenstein. Maybe I should rinse it darker? The freckles might be less noticeable that way. Very dark red? Almost auburn? I looked in the mirror. Useless. Too curly; practically frizzy. And wigs were *out*.

I held out my hand, palm up, as soon as Angela let me in. For a moment, she didn't catch on, but then she gave me the promissory note. I didn't bother reading it—she wouldn't dare try to cheat—just put it in my pocket. The paper was damp and crumpled and Angela's eyes were red and she looked real worried. What did she think I was going to ask for, her hand in marriage? In spite of everything, she looked absolutely terrific. All in white, with lace all over, a low-cut cocktail dress—and she was wearing her mother's moonstone jewelry!

Mrs. Phillips *never* let anyone, *anyone*, even touch her moonstones, and I don't blame her.

It was the most romantic thing that had ever happened in Rockhill. In all of New Hampshire, I bet. Everybody knows the story. When Mr. Phillips was overseas—he wasn't rich then—he saved all his pay and secretly bought moonstones, one by one, matching them according to his dream. Moonstones were pretty cheap in the olden days, but not on a soldier's pay, so he just bought exactly the ones he needed. They don't look like much; just smooth, oval pieces of dull glass. But when you put them against black velvet, the way Mrs. Phillips wears them once a year on her wedding anniversary, in candlelight, they become beautiful, with a soft, light-blue glow inside, like—like true love, soft and fine.

When he was discharged, Mr. Phillips got off in New York instead of making his plane connection to Manchester. He went to the jewelry district and found an old Yemenite silversmith, a Jewish refugee whose dark eyes glowed when he saw the moonstones and who knew exactly what to do with them. The silversmith made heavy, antique, Middle Eastern settings for the stones, and fashioned them into a set exactly as Mr.



Phillips had envisioned them in the jungle: a three-tiered necklace with a teardrop pendant at the bottom, a heavy ring with a single huge moonstone parallel to the finger, and a pair of earrings, with a small circular stone at the top and a drop-shaped moonstone hanging. It was the most beautiful loving thing I had ever seen.

Although he thought the jeweler charged him less than the cost of the silver alone because he was a soldier, Mr. Phillips spent every cent he had for the setting and for some food while he was waiting, so he had to hitchhike home and he couldn't buy anything to eat on the way. It took two days to get back.

Even though he didn't have a job yet and her father didn't like him, he and Mrs. Phillips were married a month later. At the reception, right after they cut the cake, Mr. Phillips asked his bride to turn around and close her eyes. Right there, right in front of everyone, he hung the moonstone necklace around her neck, slipped the ring on her right ring finger, and handed her the earrings to put on herself. Mrs. Phillips almost fainted and fell into his arms and started crying. My mother told me it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen, and I don't think she meant the moonstones. I would give any-

thing if that would happen to me, but it won't. Ever. I'll be lucky to even . . .

Ever since then . . . Moonstones are soft and delicate; they not only scratch easily, they wear and get dull. So Mrs. Phillips puts them on only once a year, on their wedding anniversary. They give a party and invite everyone who was at the original wedding, and their families. Mrs. Phillips wears a high-necked black velvet gown and her wedding ring. Nothing else; she never got an engagement ring. At the end of the evening, Mr. Phillips asks her to stand up and turn around and close her eyes. Then he hangs the necklace around her neck, slides the ring on her right ring finger, and hands her the earrings to put on herself. She falls into his arms—and it isn't fake—and starts crying, and every woman in the house is crying too, and wishing . . . But for them, it's too late. For me too, I guess.

"Are you crazy, Angela," I screamed. "Why are you wearing the moonstones? If your mother ever finds out . . ."

"The others promised not to tell. I just wanted, just this once, to feel . . . to be . . . The moonstones are so beautiful and they're just right for my dress and my hair and—and I thought if I put them on tonight, I would



be . . .” She started crying again.

How could I explain to her that the moonstones weren’t magic, that you couldn’t just put them on and become instantly loved? Or lovable? Or that wearing them would make you *able* to love? Didn’t she understand that it was love that made the moonstones magic, not the other way around? The deep love, the true love her mother and father had for each other? That without that love the moonstones were just pretty pebbles? The moonstones looked just as beautiful on Angela’s creamy skin as they did on black velvet and Angela could have been just then, if she hadn’t been crying, the most beautiful sixteen-year-old girl in the whole world. Only not quite. Something was wrong, something was missing. The earrings! I pointed to her ears. “I can’t find them,” she sobbed. “You have to find them. Please, Patsy. My mother will kill me. And my father . . . I don’t know what he’ll do.”

“Did you look all over?” I asked. “Get the others to help?” Then I realized: You don’t lose *two* earrings; when one falls off, you know it. “Where did you leave them?”

“They’re not there. Somebody took them.”

“Tonight? One of your friends?

That’s why you told me Andy might be involved?”

She nodded miserably. “I can’t even ask them. Whoever took them . . . It was purposely; it couldn’t have been an accident. They were *stolen*. If I accuse anyone, and it isn’t him—or her—I’ll lose all my friends. I could even get into worse trouble.”

“So you can’t call the police either, otherwise your father will find out?” Angela nodded again. “And you want me to find who took the earrings and make him give them back?”

“Tonight. It must be tonight, before twelve, before my parents come back. I don’t even care who took them. Yes, I do, I want to know, but I don’t want to make trouble, not in front of everybody so my father will find out.”

“This is really going to cost you, Angela.” I could just imagine how she’d feel when I got done with her.

“I don’t care. Just *hurry*.”

“Who’s here besides Andy and you?”

“Just two couples.” As I suspected; it was a couples party. And she and Andy were the third couple; the poor wimp didn’t have a chance. “Jerry Sanders with Beverly Waldron, and Howard Kemp with Lucy Muller.” Boy, what a selection. Jerry and Howard were varsity

football players; nice guys, but linemen, if you know what I mean. Big, strong, and that's it. Beverly was Angela's best friend, pretty and *very* popular, the only girl who could possibly get more votes than Angela, and I could easily guess why if I wanted to. Lucy was head cheerleader and starred in all the Annual Musicals; very talented, but she never started a sentence without an "I." Andy wouldn't be able to talk to anyone in the place including Angela, whose brains were all in her you-know-what. Poor Andy.

"Do you do this often, Angela? Were any of them in your house before?"

"None of the boys, my father doesn't like football players, but the girls have been over lots of times."

I thought for a moment. "Show me where you put the earrings."

Her father's study was lined with books, shelves from floor to ceiling all around the room. A beautiful big walnut desk was near the far wall, a big leather couch on the right, and two leather wing chairs on the left. There were small round tables at the end of the couch and next to each chair, each with good reading lamps. If the books had all been whodunits, I could have lived in that room for the rest of my life.

Angela walked over to the big couch and put her hand behind the pillow at the end. "Here. I put them right here."

"Why there? Why did you come in here in the first place?" It wasn't to read, that was for sure, but let her tell me.

"I . . . It was Andy's idea. We wanted a little privacy, a place where we could talk." I'll bet. And Andy, who had never been in that house before, knew exactly where to take her? Hah! You have to be pretty dumb to tell such an obvious lie to a whodunit reader.

"Whatever for?" I asked. I may never have had a date, but I read a lot and I wanted her to say it out loud; you never know what you can learn from an investigative interrogation. "Weren't you the hostess? Supposed to entertain *all* your guests?"

"They wanted to be alone, too. Jerry and Bevvv stayed in the living room, and Howard and Lucy went out on the back porch."

"You and Andy were on the leather couch?"

"We were just sitting there talking." Would *anyone* believe that? "Then he got very romantic and started kissing me passionately. I was *so* surprised and he was so—so *forceful* that I fell over backwards." Andy is so skinny she didn't have to pull

him very hard was what I figured.

"Then how did the earrings get behind the couch pillow?"

"Well . . ." Trying to figure out how to say it. "Andy was a little—uh—inexperienced—" not any more, I bet "—and he didn't give me a chance to . . . to get ready. He started kissing me so fast and so hard that . . . I reached up with my free hand and took off my earrings."

"Why?"

She looked at me as though I was retarded. Luckily for her, she didn't make any cracks. "My earlobes are very—very *sensitive*, and when a boy discovers that, he just kisses them and kisses them and . . . and he could swallow an earring." From *kissing*? Come on, Angela! But this could be useful; if I ever started getting kissed, I'd make sure: NO EARRINGS. Angela isn't the only one who has sensitive earlobes, I'll bet. "So I pushed the earrings down between the back of the couch and the pillow. For safety." And to free her hand, right?

"When did you discover they were gone?"

"About a half hour later. I didn't want things to get *completely* out of control, so we went back into the living room."

"You didn't look for the earrings before you left the study?"

"I was a bit . . . My mind

wasn't on it." Mind? Hah!

"Didn't you disturb Jerry and Bevvy?"

"Oh, no, I wouldn't do a thing like *that*. I peeked in first, but they were just getting up from the couch, like they were going to go somewhere."

"So you and Andy went into the living room and sat on the couch?"

"Oh, no, that would have been almost as bad as . . . I took him into the kitchen and gave him a cold drink." Cold drinks don't work. Not even cold showers. I know.

"After that, when we were all gathered in the living room, I had to fix my hair, so I went to the powder room. When I looked in the mirror, that's when I noticed."

"You went back to the study and checked the couch?"

"All over. I almost went crazy. They weren't *in* the couch, or *near* the couch or around in the study, or *anything*. That's when I panicked and called you." Thanks heaps, Angela.

"And I'm not allowed to accuse your friends? Or even upset them?"

"They're my friends, my guests. Can't you do it without making any trouble?"

I thought for a while. Alexander Magnus Gold had never faced a problem like this with such a handicap, nor had Giles

Sullivan. They, at least, could accuse the guilty perpetrator. What would they do in my shoes? Go crazy, I guess; men are so weak. Morally, that is. Then I had it. A flash. It had to work. It had *better* work; there was no other way to do it. It *would* work. The thief couldn't tell anyone not to give me the right answers because, when it all came out, as it had to if the earrings weren't returned before Mr. and Mrs. Phillips came home, it would prove that the thief, just by telling . . . What I mean is, the thief had to give the wrong answers and the others had to give the right answers, so . . . Then I would—I'm not sure what, but I had to get Step One done first. If it worked.

"Get me a notebook and a pen," I told Angela, "and send them to me, one at a time, in any order. Here, in the kitchen."

"But what should I tell them?"

"Say I'm conducting a psychological experiment, and you promised me I could do it and you'd get everyone to cooperate. It'll only take a minute each."

"They'll never believe that I . . ." She looked ready to start crying again. "Just to help *you*? On a Saturday night? With my folks away? Couples?"

Unbelievable. That moron . . . Here she was, an hour away from being sent to a convent, and she was worried about what

her friends, one of whom was a thief, would think? "You better make them believe it, Angela," I said firmly. "Because if you don't, you'd better start thinking of a good story to tell your father. About how this gang of thieves broke in and chloroformed you all, including two big linemen, and then went right to where the moonstones were hidden and took only the earrings and left the necklace and the ring and all the other really expensive jewelry your mother has and—"

"All right." She put her hands over her ears. "I'll make them do it. But how will that . . ."

"Let me worry about it," I said. "Besides, it's our only chance." Angela turned blue. I shouldn't have said that; sometimes honesty is not the best policy. "Go." I had to push her. "Tell them you did your quiz already."

Andy came in first. I had him sit opposite me at the kitchen table. He started to say something to me, sort of friendly like, but I stopped him. Any other time, I would have been thrilled, but now? A detective has to be professional, to put his—her—client's interests first. "Just tell me," I said, "the item of furnishings that impressed you most in each room of the house. Only the downstairs part. Not the lavatories or the kitch-

ens or the halls; only the major rooms."

"In the living room," he said thoughtfully, "it has to be the piano. It's a Bösendorfer Concert Grand, and I have a record at home that—"

"No details; just what it is. Keep going."

He looked at me oddly, so I wrote his name on the paper, and "piano." "In the dining room, the carved sideboard. In the study, the Persian rug." I'll *kill* him. Her. Both. If they rolled off the couch onto the rug . . . "In the TV room, the multi-amped stereo. And in the playroom, the ping-pong table."

I finished writing and sent him away. "Send in the next subject."

It was Jerry Sanders. "The soda fountain, that was real neat. And the big fireplace in the living room. All those shelves of books, just like a library." He thought hard. "The built-in barbecue on the back porch. The big dining room table; you could put the whole team around it. The giant speakers; boy, that bass really shook the floor. And the bear-skin rug in the den."

Lucy Muller was dressed dramatically, as usual. A simple black dress with a big Dayglo yellow lightning flash let in jaggedly across the front, running from her left breast to her

right knee. I guess she wanted to make sure she wouldn't get hit by a car if she decided to walk home. Which, according to the best of rumors, hadn't happened yet, so there was no need to worry about cars. Getting hit by one, I mean. She selected—it might have been a good psychological test at that—the netsuke cabinet with the big glass front in the living room. The china closet, with all that Royal Doulton china. The big walnut desk. The ballet barre in the playroom. The African violets with the special lighting on the porch. And the TV sound camera setup.

Howard came in next, and he really concentrated. "The size of the living room, does that count? It's as big as my whole house. How about those hanging lights over the dining room table? And those big wing chairs; I could really be comfortable in one of those." Howard was even bigger than Jerry. "The multi-gym; you could get a workout right in your own house. The swinging seats on the porch; my grandmother had one of those."

Beverly was dressed to kill. Her mother would have had a fit if she saw her only daughter like that. A tight red dress, strapless, held up by glue or prayers or something, an innocent little red ribbon holding

her hair back, and black net stockings. She must have seen my jaw drop and thought it was envy; glad to have made your day, Bevvv. "The needlepoint-covered couch in the living room is just perfect," she said. "And the slim, delicate dining room chairs. The recliner in the den is really comfortable and looks just right. The wall of mirrors in the playroom gym area. And the huge movie screen." I finished making notes and told her to send in Angela.

Angela had fixed her face during the interrogations, but she dropped her false brave smile the minute she came into the kitchen. "What do I do next?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said. "It's over."

"You failed," she moaned, her lower lip trembling. "My father will kill me, and my mother will throw me out."

"Relax, Angela," I reassured her. "I know who did it." Her eyes opened wide. "I just have to figure out how to get the moonstone earrings back. Quietly." I sat for a moment thinking. Simple. It was simple, really, from the right approach. "Take me into the living room." Angela looked worried, probably afraid I might embarrass her innocent little seraphim friends. Tough. Let her worry; might do her some good.

The five of them were sitting

quietly talking. They knew something was wrong, even the football linemen. "Oh, I forgot to tell you," I said to Angela casually, "when we were in the kitchen, Bevvv told me she found your earrings. Right, Bevvv?"

Beverly Waldron turned white, then as red as her dress. "That's right, Angela," she said in a choked voice, taking the earrings out of her clutch bag and handing them to Angela. "I was going to tell you before, but when Carrots—Patricia—came I forgot all about it." Nobody believed her.

Angela was red, too. She took the earrings, but didn't put them on. Instead she took off the ring and the necklace and held the moonstone set in her hands. "My parents will be home soon," she said, without looking at her watch. "Will you boys take the girls home now?" Jerry and Howard nodded. As they were leaving, Angela turned to go upstairs. To her mother's bedroom, I guess.

"Wait," I called her back. "We have an agreement, remember?" Angela turned back. She looked all worn out. "You have to give me whatever I want, Angela." She nodded dully. Now was the time. I had it all planned. Everything memorized. I was going to tear the promissory note into tiny

little pieces, drop them on the floor, and say, in front of her friends—it would be all over the school on Monday—"The trouble is, Angela, you don't have *anything* I want." But I looked at the poor frightened soul, the empty little doll whose whole life was in her looks, and I saw, clear as in a crystal ball, that her husband might buy her a diamond and platinum necklace for their anniversary, but he would never put a cheap-but-oh-so-precious handmade moonstone necklace that he had dreamed of for two years, and spent his last penny on, around her neck on their wedding day. And Angela would never look as beautiful as her mother did that first time I saw Mr. Phillips put the moonstone necklace around his wife's neck: so much love, so much.

I saw that Angela—it was such a surprise to me, and an even bigger surprise that I had not seen it sooner—that Angela wasn't beautiful, she was just *pretty*. And I understood that ... that I was alive and she ... she had never lived. Not really. I realized that I didn't have to hurt her, that instead I should feel sorry for her, for what she had done to hurt herself. I saw that I should give her not what she deserved but what she needed.

"I want you," I measured my

words carefully, "I want you to give a hundred hours of your time this year, two hours a week, working in the Home for the Blind. They can't see what you look like there, but they can see very clearly what you are. At the end of the hundred hours, if you've become beautiful, really beautiful, they'll know. And you'll know, too. It's your last chance, Angela. Do it yourself. For yourself. I won't check up on you." I turned to go.

"Wait," Andy said, when I reached the door. "I'll go with you."

Outside, he asked, "How did you know?"

"The questions I asked. It wasn't really a psychological test, it was a—a criminal investigation."

"I knew it couldn't be a psychological test," he said. "I'd never heard of anything like that before. How did it work?"

"Take you, for example. You didn't mention any item of furnishings from the den or the back porch."

"Because I was never in either place. Angela just showed me—"

"Never mind," I interrupted. "I have a very good idea of what she showed you. Anyway, Howard didn't mention anything in the den, and he really tried to remember, which means he was



never in the den. Lucy didn't mention anything from the den either, though she'd been in Angela's house many times and must've seen the room. I figured it was because she hadn't been in the den tonight and anything she's not in doesn't exist for her. On the other hand, Jerry was very impressed by all the shelves filled with books; he was in the study tonight. Since he was with Beverly all night—I'm sure she didn't leave him wandering around alone—she must've been in the study with him. Knowing Beverly's reputation, I'm sure they were sitting on the couch."

"I guess so, but what does that have to do with it?"

"That's where Angela left the earrings. But although Beverly had been in the study tonight, she didn't mention anything from there. Why didn't she? It was full of beautiful and impressive things, and she'd been in the house before."

"The wicked flee when no man pursueth," Andy quoted. "I thought it would be something like that." He was quiet for a moment, then said, "That was a pretty neat way you got Beverly to give Angela back the earrings."

"We detectives," I tossed off lightly, although I was really glowing, "work quietly our wonders to perform." Not like

Gold or Sullivan; we don't brag. Women are nicer about practically everything.

"I don't understand," Andy said, "why Beverly stole the earrings. She couldn't even wear them. Even if she took them home, Mr. Phillips would have called the police and she'd have been arrested within an hour. After all, it took you only twenty minutes."

"The police couldn't do it my way," I pointed out. "They would have questioned everybody until someone confessed. But Beverly didn't intend to steal the earrings; she only wanted to wear them for fifteen minutes when she was all alone, to see if they would work their magic on her the way she thought they did on Mrs. Phillips. She would have put them back where she found them and nobody would have known. But Angela discovered they were missing, and then it was too late."

"How did Beverly know . . ."

"Did you see the way Angela looked when she came back from the study?"

"Yeah, sort of—wild."

"Beverly knew what that meant. She had to keep the earrings in her bag until she figured out what to do with them. But she's not very bright, and when Angela panicked and called me in . . ."

"Why didn't she just drop them on the floor or leave them in the girls' lav?"

"If she dropped them just anywhere, they might have gotten stepped on and the whole story would've come out. If she put them in an out-of-the-way place, Angela might not have found them before her parents got home. If Beverly left them in the lav and Lucy found them, Angela would know Beverly had stolen them. So she just kept her mouth shut and prayed for a miracle."

He took my hand in this—just took it; so masterful—and we walked quietly for a few blocks. As we were approaching my house, he stopped me. "You know, Pat," he said. "I've always thought it would be

—uh—fun to know you, to be your friend. I've always wanted to, but I was afraid. You were so beautiful and funny and smart and strong and confident and . . . that I . . . I didn't want you to laugh at me. But I'd like. . . . There's an old Sherlock Holmes coming at the Film Society. Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce. It's really great. Would you mind going with me? Next Saturday? Eight o'clock?"

Beautiful, huh? Me? "I'll think about it," I said. "I'll let you know."

"And if you ever have another case . . . ? I'm very interested in mysteries, you know. I'd really like to . . ."

"I'll think about that, too," I said.

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*(continued from page 3)*

tion of items donated by mystery authors, publishers, and others.

For further information and an invitation, write to: Mystery Writers of America, Inc., 236 West 27th Street, New York, New York 10001. The dinner

costs \$70 per person. It will take place on Thursday, April 26, at the Sheraton Centre Hotel at seven o'clock (preceded by a reception at six o'clock). The panel discussions will be held nearby, at the Sheraton City Squire, on Saturday, April 28. (There is an additional fee.)

# UNSOLVED

by Lassiter Wren  
and Randle McKay

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?  
The answer will appear in the June issue.*

On the night of March 24, 1906, the magnificent residence of Sir Lionel Graymont, near Rivington, a suburb of Liverpool, was burned to the ground. The historic mansion was filled with costly objects of art, all of which were heavily insured. The fire had originated somewhere in the servants' quarters, but each of the seven servants who fled precipitately from the topmost story denied knowledge of how it started or in which room. Each claimed to have been roused from sleep by smoke and shouts, only in time to flee to safety.

Sir Lionel was wintering in Italy at the time, and only the servants occupied the house. Constable Albert Marquard, who arrived first on the scene after the fire brigade, undertook a rigorous questioning of each of the servants. At first he learned of nothing which aroused his suspicions. Each told an apparently straightforward story of having gone to bed, leaving no lights burning, and waking only to find the entire servants' quarters a madhouse of flame and smoke. It seemed remarkable indeed that no casualty had occurred.

But at length the butler came to Marquard and said:

"I agree with you: it looks suspicious. We have always guarded carefully against fire. Our wing isn't wired, of course, and it couldn't have been that. I'll swear that nothing but safety matches are ever used in the house. I never saw anyone use anything else here—so it couldn't have been mice nibbling matches that started it. Did it strike you, sir, that the scullion boy looked just a little bit queer when you talked with him?"

As Marquard later related the story, the scullion boy had not struck him as queer, but he thought over what the butler had said

and sought the boy again. To his surprise the boy grew nervous and finally fell to weeping. Marquard drew him aside and within a few minutes had extracted the following confession from him:

The fire had started through his fault and he had been so overwhelmed with fright at the result of his carelessness that he had concealed all knowledge of it. He feared that he would be put in jail, he said, for having caused the destruction. The circumstances as he narrated them were as follows:

"I'd only been here three months and I hadn't written to my mother yet. I got ashamed at not writing to her. I lay in bed, sir, thinking how ungrateful I was not writing her. She was awfully good to me. I couldn't sleep for thinking about it. I said to myself: 'If I don't write my mother right now, I can't ever sleep.'

"So I got up. I had a pencil, but I didn't have any paper and envelopes in my room. They were in my trunk which my mother had packed for me—and that was in the storehouse attic. I knew everyone was asleep, it was so late. So I lighted my candle and went down the hallway to the storehouse door. It's at the foot of a ladder that goes up to where my trunk was. I know I shouldn't have done it that way, with the candle in my hand—but I went up, and I got the trunk opened, and I took the envelopes and the paper out, and I closed the trunk again, and I started down the ladder.

"It's terribly hard coming down that ladder with a candle in your hand. The steps are slippery. The wood is terribly old and dry, and it's all cobwebs up and down the side of it between it and the wall. All of a sudden the candle sort of slipped sideways in my hand and there was a big puff of flame right up the side of the ladder, when the cobwebs caught—and then I saw some papers, up above, catch from them, and I was so frightened I fell off the ladder. I must have fainted then because that's all I remember till I heard shouting down the hallway and I was feeling terrible from smoke—and I staggered downstairs. So help me God, that's the truth!"

And the scullion boy burst into dry sobs and turned away.

Marquard looked at the butler, whose face was a study of mingled pity and indignation.

"Is it true that the place was in the condition he described—old wood, dry, with old cobwebs all about?"

The butler nodded.

"It might have happened just that way," he said. "But I'd given orders long ago to have it cleaned regularly, sir. I think he's telling

the truth. Don't be too hard on him, constable! He's a good boy. We all like him."

Marquard withdrew abruptly, with orders to another constable to keep an eye on the scullion boy. Ten minutes later he returned and placed the boy under arrest. And the butler was shocked to learn the next day that the scullion boy had confessed to Marquard's charge of incendiarism.

The question to be answered is:

*What made Marquard doubt the truth of the scullion boy's recital and suspect him of being a "firebug"?*

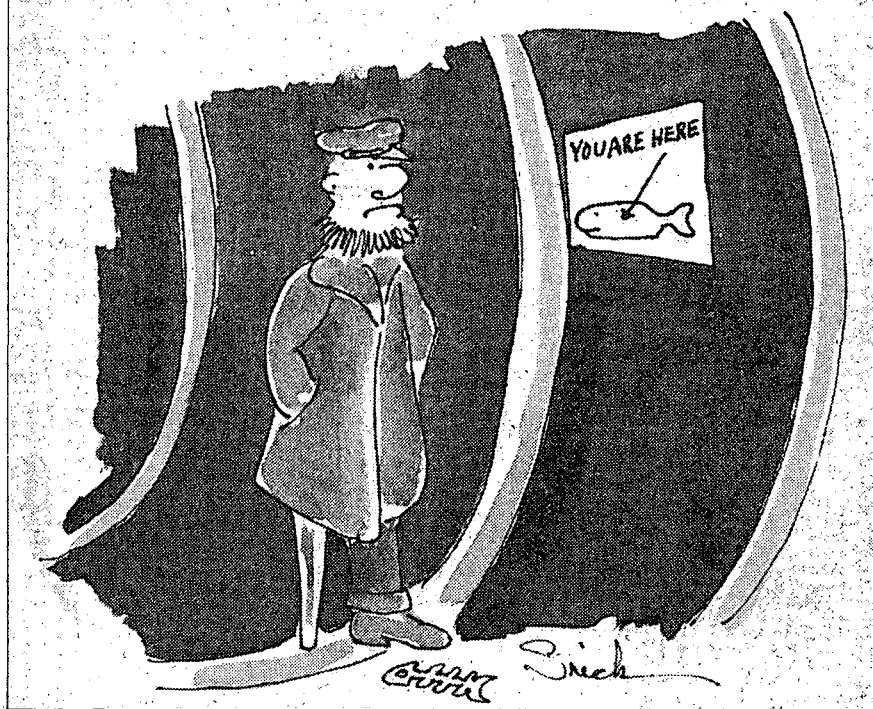
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See page 100 for the solution to the April puzzle.

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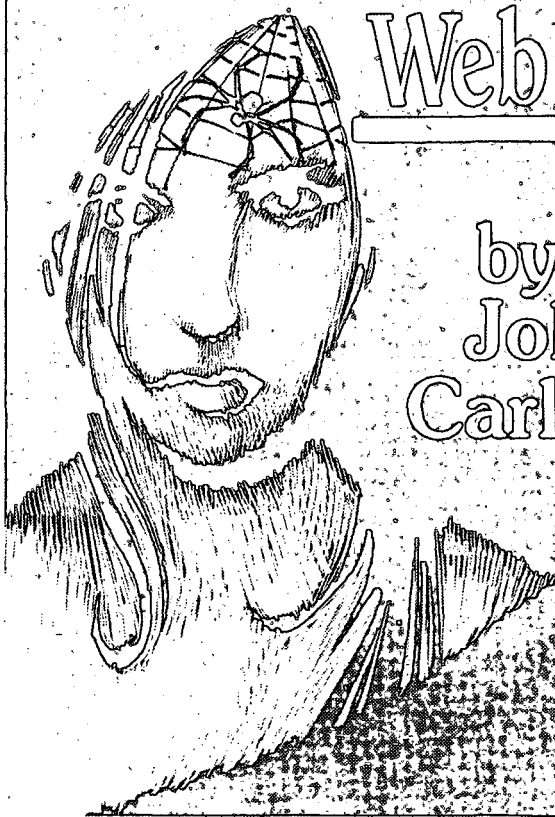
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FICTION

# Caught in the Web

by  
John  
Carlson



**B**usiness was booming. By that I mean my car payments were only three months behind, the utilities had been reconnected, and at supper there was actual hamburger in my Hamburger Helper. On top of all that, my checking account statement showed a balance of four hundred eighty-seven dollars.

Naturally, I was getting choosy about the jobs I'd accept.

The telephone rang. I let it, four more times, then picked up the receiver.

"Stone Investigations Unlimited. Quality work at bargain basement prices," I said. "Mr. Stone is out of the office. At the tone, leave your name and number . . ."

"Cut the crap, Clyde," the voice on the other end broke in. "It's Harry."

As if he had to tell me. The recipe for a voice like Harry Collier's is as follows: Take one Tennessee twang. Marinate in gallons of whisky. Grill with a couple of hundred thousand Lucky Strikes, the unfiltered ones. Add gravel, serve with all the warmth and charm of a cement mixer, and voila! Harry on the phone was unmistakable. He was also a repo man, and a darned good one.

I said, "What's up?"

He wheezed, coughed, and spat. "I need you for a job."

This came as no surprise. Harry'd needed me for jobs before. He was a little guy, maybe a hundred twenty pounds tops, and had thrived in his chosen profession on brains, not brawn. But every now and then he ran into something where brains might not be enough.

Then he liked to take someone along to lend moral support, plus crack heads with a bat if necessary. That's where I fit in.

"What's it pay?" I asked, smiling.

He allowed himself what would have been a belly laugh, if he'd had a belly. "Same as always, fifty bucks."

I often wondered if Harry'd ever heard of inflation. Fifty bucks was what he'd been paying me since our first collaboration five years ago, way before I had a checking account with four hundred eighty-seven dollars in it.

It was my turn to laugh. "I'll pass, Harry."

Dead air. "You're kidding?"

"Nope."

"Aw, c'mon, Clyde. All you gotta do is go along for a ride."

"Sorry, Harry. I'm busy."

I was waiting for him to up the offer when papers started rustling in the background. "Hey, seems I read your name someplace lately," he said brightly. "Yep, here it is. And



wouldn't you know it, it's on a repossession order! You been keeping up with your car payments, Clyde?"

"Now, hold on a minute, Harry," I sputtered. "You wouldn't do that to me."

He cleared the gravel from his throat. "Well, I suppose I could move this to the bottom of the pile. 'Course, I'd only do it for a pal."

And that's why, two hours later, I was riding shotgun in Harry's cherry red Camaro through the nastiest part of our fair city.

**D**id I say nasty? The place was worse than nasty. Even the hoodlums looked nervous. We drove past bodies stretched out on sidewalks, our doors locked and the windows up. Broken glass. Bloodstained sidewalks. Ladies turned tricks. Men shared bottles in doorways. Outside a corner bar three scrawny kids in gym clothes were pummeling a fat guy. A grey-haired woman in a torn, gaping housecoat ran up and pounded on Harry's window. "Do something!" she screamed.

"You bet!" Harry said, and floored it.

Twenty minutes later we were still cruising, Harry getting madder by the block. "You'd think the kids could leave up

one lousy street sign, wouldn't ya?" he growled when, like a mirage, one materialized in the smoky glow of a street light.

"Jackson Street! About time." He took a hard left, then a right, then another left onto a blackened boulevard lined with the shadowy remains of apartment houses. Collins Street. "Bingo," he said.

I said, "Huh?"

"That one." He nodded toward the dim outline of a long, low automobile parked on the street. "Light blue Cadillac."

Harry'd already explained it belonged to a hard little up-and-coming entrepreneur named Nicko who'd done time for auto theft, felonious assault, and attempted murder. This thrilled me no end. Apparently the guy had a mental block. He could keep track of his hookers and numbers and the kids who peddled dope for him; he just couldn't remember to send an occasional check to the finance company. A kindred spirit.

Harry angled the Camaro toward some empty curb about a hundred feet past the Caddy and handed me his keys. We'd choreographed the whole thing. I'd stand guard with the bat while he boosted the car, no big deal since a farsighted loan officer had made duplicates of Nicko's keys. Then I'd follow him home in the Camaro and

have a checking account with five hundred thirty-seven dollars in it.

Easy as pie.

We walked wordlessly, nonchalantly, toward the Caddy. I took up my position behind him, hoisted the bat, and heard the tinkling of keys.

"Dammit!" Harry said furiously, trying unsuccessfully to whisper.

"What?"

"Wrong keys."

Somewhere in the darkness a door screamed on rusty hinges.

"Try another pocket," I advised.

"I am!" Keys tinkled again. "Double dammit!"

Across the street a porch erupted in light. "Jeez, Harry!" I yelled. "Somebody's coming out!"

In quick succession I heard Harry swear again, the blessed sound of a lock releasing, then a woman shouting, "They're stealing Nicko's wheels!"

Harry'd barely dropped into the driver's seat when people began pouring from the house like fire ants. I went into my batting stance, came to my senses, dropped the bat and did an Olympic-quality swan dive through the gap between Harry and the steering wheel. By the time he got it started they were on us, screaming and punching and kicking at the windows. A

couple of them tumbled to the pavement as Harry stomped the accelerator, a couple more when he buried the brake.

"My Camaro! My Camaro!"

"Forget it! Forget it!"

Harry had a moment's indecision before a deafening flash of light blew out the back window. This time he hit the gas and stayed on it, sliding like Mario Andretti onto the first available cross street and running the next three stop lights before a police siren blasted through the space where the rear window had been. Cops approached the car from left and right, their guns pointed inside. Harry sat, wide-eyed, babbling like a baby. The cop on his side told him to shut up, but Harry kept at it.

"Okay, buddy," the cop said, shooting his flashlight around the interior of the car. "You wanna talk so bad, whaddya got to say about what's in the back seat?"

I turned around and groaned. Harry did the same. It was Nicko, from the look of things, his powder blue suit a perfect match for the car's upholstery. Especially if you ignored the bloodstains.

"I'm waiting," the cop said over his gun barrel. "Whaddya got to say?"

Harry clutched his chest and gurgled. "My heart."

They hauled Harry off to County General Hospital, me to police headquarters. I was out in three hours, thanks to my sterling reputation and my brother-in-law Frank, who's an alderman. I also got the impression there wouldn't be much weeping and wailing, not to mention gnashing of teeth, at police headquarters over the premature demise of one Nicko Walters.

"Thanks, Frank," I said, when he came to my rescue, pajamas under his trenchcoat. "I thought they were going to give me some trouble."

"More likely the Garbage-man of the Month award," he said, and went back home to Sis and bed.

I spent Saturday recovering from Friday. Sunday morning I went out for some jelly rolls and a newspaper, took them back to my apartment, and brewed some coffee. The coroner had ruled that Nicko was dead a couple of hours before Harry and I had taken his Caddy. One shot, a .38, at the base of the skull, and never mind the shotgun pellets that had taken the back of his head off.

While I was reading the story the phone rang. It was Harry.

"How's things?" I asked.

"Great. They serve the best Jell-O here I've ever tasted."

"Really?"

"Hell no, not really! They won't let me smoke. They won't let me drink. My roommate's got gas and I got acute angina. Other than that, everything's swell, except I need your help."

I took a quick look at my appointment calendar. It was empty. Big surprise. "No problem, Harry. I'll go ask around, see what I can dig up on who might've wanted to cool Nicko's jets. Then I'll . . ."

"Clyde?"

"Yeah, Harry?"

"Just pick up my car, will ya?"

**I**t took ten bucks' worth of persuading just to get the cabbie to take me there in broad daylight, and even then he barely slowed down to let me out. Can't say I blame him. The place looked almost as ominous as it had at night. Harry's Camaro was right where he'd parked it, though, minus the hubcaps but otherwise whole. A minor miracle.

I dug my pocketknife from my pocket and shimmied under the front end. The spare key case was right where Harry'd said it would be, bound to the bumper with several lengths of electrician's tape. I was concentrating on sawing through the tape when somebody kicked me hard in the shins.

"Get outa there," a high-pitched male voice ordered.

I took a second too long to think about it. Hands grabbed me roughly by the ankles and yanked me into sunlight.

They were just kids, five or six of them, maybe fourteen, fifteen years old, ratty-looking street types with hard stares to match. Obviously trouble. I decided to come on strong. Getting to my feet, I picked out the tallest one and fixed him with a hard stare of my own.

"You punks' mommies know you're outside alone?" I said.

When I regained consciousness, I was sore all over, a buzz-saw was blatting annoyingly somewhere inside my head, and I was on a cot in a dank, windowless room that reeked of urine and was illuminated by a single unshaded light bulb. That was the good news. The bad news was the lady with the spiderweb tattooed on her forehead.

As spiderweb tattoos go, it was a darned good one. The thin black lines were anchored at the top of her left temple, then grew until they slanted fully halfway across the skin from just above her left eyebrow to the hairline over her right temple. Smack dab in the middle was a spider. A black widow, judging from the tiny red-tinted hourglass. I stared at it, trans-

fixed. It took a lot of moxie for a lady to have a spiderweb tattooed on her forehead, I figured. Either that, or she was totally out of her mind.

"Nice tattoo," I said.

She smiled, sharklike, and sat on the edge of the cot. "Want one like it?" she asked icily.

"Nah."

The smile left her mouth. "The car. What were you doing to it?"

My hands were numb. I held them up. They were tightly bound with electrical cord. "You mind undoing that, it's starting to hurt."

"Count your blessings," she said. "It could be around your neck."

She had a point. I dropped my hands and said, "I was picking it up for a friend."

"Your friend, he the guy who stole the Cadillac the other night?"

"Stole a Cadillac?" I managed a chuckle. "Nah, he's not the kind of guy who'd do something like that."

She smiled again, studying my face, nibbling lightly on a fingernail. The nail was two inches long, blood red. She brought the nail from her mouth to the corner of my left temple, then slowly began etching imaginary lines across my forehead.

"Then again, I'm a lousy

judge of character."

She laughed. I tried not to wet my pants. "You're a private investigator?" she asked.

I nodded. "Uh-huh, and my brother-in-law's an alderman."

"I don't care squat what your brother-in-law is, sweetie," she said, getting to her feet and reaching for the lanyard dangling from the ceiling light. She stood there, poised to yank it, giving me a last look.

"I'm going to trust you to do the right thing," she said.

"What's that mean?"

"Just do the right thing," she said fiercely.

"You bet," I said.

The smile was back on her mouth. "You sure you don't want a tattoo?"

I gave my head a vigorous shake and the light went out, her laugh fading into the blackness.

**T**hey'd put a cloth bag over my head, hoisted me into the trunk of the Camaro, and driven me away.

When the car stopped, they'd unhooked the latch and told me to stay put until I'd counted to sixty or bad things would happen. For safety's sake I went to two hundred forty, then climbed out of the trunk and onto a street lined with nicely-kept lawns and houses, ignoring the smirks of nearby children.

A yellow parking ticket was stuck low under a wiper blade. I ripped it out, Frisbeed it onto the front passenger seat, and dropped behind the wheel. My first stop was at a friendly-looking tavern. The john was empty, so I spent a few minutes doctoring the rest of me.

When I finally walked out it was dark, the moon milky white, floating like a cataract in a black cat's eye. I spent a couple of minutes driving around, getting my bearings, and twenty minutes later pulled the Camaro to the curb outside of Collier Reclamations, Inc.

I could've dropped the keys under the driver's seat and left, I suppose, but after all I'd gone through to get it, the thought of some jerk stealing the Camaro made my stomach flip. With a little eyestrain I found the key that unlocked the padlock on the gate, then drove the Camaro onto the fenced lot. Harry's office was a small brick building, its entrance illuminated by two post-mounted security lights. I unlocked the door, reached blindly inside for a light switch, and turned it on. What I saw surprised me.

In all the years I'd known Harry I'd never actually set foot in the place. He'd always picked me up as needed. I'd have figured him for the folding-chair-and-tool-calendar school of in-

terior design. Instead I sank into carpet up to my ankles. Weird lamps arced from strategic locations, throwing their soft beams over expensive-looking pieces of Swedish furniture. Against one wall was a bar, the shelves behind it crammed with crystal glasses and good liquor. Against another was a cabinet. I opened it and was staring into a television screen that would've looked right in a movie theater. There were spacy-looking paintings on the walls. I rubbed a finger lightly across one, felt the tiny ridges roll under my skin. The real thing.

I threw a couple of ice cubes into a glass, poured myself a healthy dose of Wild Turkey, and let the chair behind his desk give me a hug.

The lap drawer whispered open with the nudge of a finger. Inside was what you'd expect. Pens, some of them ritzy fountain jobs, pencils and erasers, a stapler, and a stack of papers. I took the stack out and began to flip through it, feeling slightly guilty but unable to help myself. Healthy curiosity, after all, is part of the job. There were a few bills, an order form for office supplies, and some other forms that authorized the repossession of certain vehicles. I found the one for Nicko Walters' Caddy. Then I found mine and tossed it into the trash can.

Underneath the forms were letters, all written on bank or loan company stationery, held together by a paper clip. I scanned the top one. "... Failure to perform ..." caught my eye. "... Services no longer necessary ..." did, too. A letter from the city's largest bank said that Harry's status was under review. I flipped through the rest of them, and they all read basically the same.

Odd, I thought. Harry was in dutch with half the financial institutions in town.

I put them back, finished my drink, and carried the glass to the bar.

I'd intended to leave Harry's keys there. Just keep the ones to the door and gate to give him later and call a cab to take me home. Now I decided to borrow his car for a few days. What the heck, I figured, he couldn't use it. Besides, letters or no letters, from the look of his office he could afford the mileage.

The Camaro was humming at idle when I noticed the parking ticket on the seat beside me. If you're going to borrow a guy's car without asking him, the least you can do is keep it neat. I picked it up, leaned over to press the glovebox button, and snatched my hand back when it thudded open. An avalanche of stiff yellow envelopes dropped to the floor.

Parking tickets! There were at least twenty of them. I was pondering the morality of hiring a scofflaw to steal a hard-working private investigator's car while stuffing the envelopes back into the glove box. Then my hand brushed familiar metal.

I pulled a handkerchief from my pocket, reached into the glovebox, and took it out. Now that's interesting, I thought. It was a revolver, a .38 if I wasn't mistaken.

**I** poured myself a cola. While the fizz went down I sliced four thick slabs of Spam, two slabs of onion and threw them all into a frying pan with some butter. By the time everything was crispy I'd opened my second cola, toasted two raisin bread bagels, and smeared them with horseradish sauce. I ate my sandwiches while watching the news, then topped the meal off with a handful of pumpkin-colored cheese puffs. You can't overemphasize the importance of a good breakfast.

Sitting on my dinner table were the .38 and the traffic tickets. The .38 had one spent shell in the cylinder. I had a funny feeling I knew where the slug had ended up. Still, it was the yellow mound of traffic tickets I found most intriguing. There were twenty-three of them, from

all over the city. But four were from the vicinity of Collins and Eighteenth, including the most recently dated one. Harry'd seemed to have made his way there often enough, especially for a guy who'd had such trouble finding it Friday night.

My brother-in-law the alderman was disinclined to do me another favor, the request coming, as it was, so soon after his midnight mercy mission to spring me from police headquarters.

"Frank," I said, "you'd be helping me."

"Forget it," he said.

"Frank," I said, "you'd be promoting the cause of justice."

"Forget it."

"Frank," I said, "you'd be getting a lot of free publicity just before an election."

He met me in the parking lot of a downtown hamburger joint. "So that's all I do," he said, tucking the grocery bag with the .38 in it under his arm. "Turn this piece over to one of my buddies on the force and get him to run a ballistics check, right?"

I chomped some french fries and smiled. "That's all."

"And what're you gonna be doing?"

"Stuff," I said, and got back in the car. My car, that is. My trusty, rusty Chevette. I'd left Harry's Camaro in the parking



lot behind my apartment building, figuring it was too recognizable back in the vicinity of Collins and Eighteenth. I drove with the window down, the air conditioning long since having gone on the fritz, and with my .45 caliber Colt wedged between the seat and the transmission hump.

From a block away the house Nicko's Caddy'd been parked in front of looked like its neighbors, battered, peeling, coming apart at the seams. What made it stand out was the people. In and out they came, one after another, like a conveyor belt of streetwise humanity. Whether that was where I'd encountered spiderlady, I had no idea, having been unconscious at the time. Good guess, though.

I could see a soot-stained brick wall in the gaps between the houses, and the entrance to an alley running between them. Fingering off the safety on my Colt, I laid it on my lap, cranked the window up, and aimed my Chevette toward the alley. I was busy dodging half-naked kids and trash mounds when the brick wall came up on my left. An old factory, empty, I figured, until a vaguely reminiscent buzzsawing sound came from inside. Power tools. I stopped the car. Just then I heard somebody holler, and suddenly Grizzly Adams' iden-

tical twin was filling a nearby doorway. He charged my car, a tire iron eating up the space between us, then looked disbelievingly into the muzzle of the Colt and made it back inside with one enthusiastic hop.

By the time he came back out, if he came back out, I was long gone.

When that factory doorway had popped open, I'd seen two things. My life pass before my eyes, and what appeared to be a shiny black Lincoln Continental. The Lincoln was a lot prettier. Maybe thirty thousand bucks' worth of automobile. It took a minute to decide why the Lincoln seemed important. Then I pointed my Chevette in the direction of Collier's Reclamations, Inc.

Harry's office was as impressive in natural light as it had been under the lamps' glow. His bar looked just as inviting, too, but I had more on my mind than bourbon. I sank back into the chair behind his desk and started flipping through papers. It didn't take long to find. On heavy bond paper, emblazoned with the letterhead of Hi-Mark Financial Services, was an order authorizing the repossession of an '89 Lincoln Continental. A black one.

I kept flipping until Hi-Mark's

logo showed up again. This was one of the letters informing Harry that his professional services were no longer required.

The letters went into my pocket.

County General Hospital was busy as usual. I ended up in a lot a half mile away and was sweating by the time I reached the lobby. The faces of the people inside revealed about what you'd expect. Happiness, in the case of new parents, recovering patients, and those on their way out. Fear, for those killing time while a dear friend or relative went under the knife. Heartache, for those who knew their loved ones had run out of medical miracles. A woman at the receptionist's desk gave me Harry's room number. I bought a candy bar at the gift shop, then went up.

Harry was tickled to see me.

"I hate Milky Ways," he said. "Did you get my car?"

I assured him I had. He almost smiled. "I love that car."

We were deeply engaged in a discussion about his ailing ticker when I called him a car thief. It's a good thing he wasn't hooked up to a heart monitor or the nurses would've come running.

His face got red. "You're out of your mind, Stone!"

I pulled a chair up to the bed.

"Shut up and let me run this by you, Harry," I said, taking the papers from my pocket. "I found these in your office."

Harry's eyes went wide. "What were you doing in my office?"

I ignored the question. "Black Continental, right?"

"So?"

"So there's a black Continental in a deserted factory over in the eighteen hundred block of Collins, and I'd be willing to bet the registration number would match that one's. I'd also be willing to bet there are more cars inside. Fact is, I think the place might be a chop-shop."

He was momentarily speechless, so I kept talking.

"There's a lot of money to be made that way, Harry. Or maybe the cars are just being cleaned up, altered, transported, and sold. I don't know. Anyway, suppose you met up with somebody who knew the business. You could boost the cars. The owners would figure the bank caught up with them and that's that. No stolen car reports, nothing. Meanwhile, you tell the bank to forget it, Harry Collier can't find the car, and if Harry Collier can't find the car, nobody can."

Harry'd been sitting up. Now he flopped back on the bed. "But I'd be out of business," he said weakly.

"True," I said, smiling. "To the loan officers, it's getting a little old. But now you're making plenty on the side. And for your reputation's sake, you could throw the bank a bone now and then. Maybe even set things up to repossess the car of a pal. Say, Nicko Walters."

Harry's face went pale. "Nicko Walters?"

I nodded. "Sure. Now that he's a budding big shot, he could get another, buy it out of pocket change. He'd be doing you a favor. That's assuming he didn't end up splattered all over the back seat somehow. I found the gun, by the way."

"Gun?"

"Uh-huh. A .38 caliber Smith & Wesson. It was in your Camaro's glovebox."

Harry's hands went to his throat. "But it's not mine! I swear it, Clyde!"

I got up and pushed the chair back to the corner of the room. "Maybe not, Harry. Maybe it's not even the gun that killed Nicko. But I'll find out."

As I was leaving the room, Harry rolled out of bed and followed me, bony legs scrambling underneath his hospital gown. He grabbed my arm. "Are you telling all this to the cops? There's five thousand for you if you don't!"

I told him I didn't know what I was going to do. Just then a

nurse called from the end of the hall. "Mr. Collier, you get back in bed this instant!"

Harry gave me a last sick look and turned away. He was padding into his room when I saw his back through the gap in his hospital gown. "Jeez, Harry," I said. "What the heck's that?"

If he heard me, he didn't answer.

Frank told me what I needed to know. Yes, that was the weapon that had killed Nicko. No, there weren't any prints on it. It had been wiped clean.

"It's time for you to talk to the cops, Clyde," he said.

I said I would, but that I had one more thing I wanted to check out.

"Okay, but don't take too long," he said anxiously. "The guy you want is Frank Wiscowski, a captain. He's all set to roll on this. Nice as the day is long."

And willing to give a two-fisted, crime-fighting alderman credit where credit is due, I thought, but didn't say so. My beloved Chevette was parked right outside the phone booth. I got in and drove to the house at Eighteenth and Collier.

My arrival caused a stir. Maybe it was the force of my presence, or maybe it was be-

cause of the Colt in my hand. Whatever, people outside scattered and the bonecrusher at the entrance slammed the door in my face. I hammered it with the butt of my gun. "I want to talk to her!"

I heard a scrambling behind the door, mumbled voices, then sensed someone looking through the peephole. When it opened, she was there.

"You're living dangerously," she said.

I tried not to stare at her forehead, but couldn't help myself. "I just want a minute."

She nodded the way and I went inside. Eyes followed me, some hateful, some looking past me into nirvana. Or oblivion. "This a crack house?" I asked.

"You're a nosy son of a bitch," she said.

The kitchen was filthy. She pushed aside some of the trash littering the table and sat. I did, too. "Name Harry Collier mean anything to you?"

Her eyes froze. "Friend of my brother's."

"Who's your brother?"

"Nicko Walters. Least he was."

There was a pack of Kools and matches on the table. I lit one, my hand shaking. "I saw Harry today. His back's tattooed."

She rubbed her forehead, as if she could erase it. "Harry and

my brother, they both had a thing for tattoos." She paused and looked away. "They even did each other. Harry's covered with them. All over. Nicko, too."

"What I saw was a spider-web."

She didn't react. I was about to ask the question but then she saved me the trouble. "We used to party. Harry with his booze. Me and Nicko in our own way. I nodded off one night. They kept shooting me up. I finally woke up . . . like this. Harry'd done it. Spiderwebs are a favorite theme of his. Nicko'd sat there and watched. Must have been a great time I missed, huh?" she said coldly.

All I could do was shake my head. There was only one thing more to ask. "Did you kill your brother and set Harry up?"

Her mouth twisted with the hint of a smile. "You better finish that smoke. It's time to leave."

She walked me past a kid who was doubled over in a corner, moaning and sucking for air and retching. At the door I turned to her. "This is a lousy way to make ends meet."

For a moment she just stared at me. "What am I gonna do?" she said finally, her voice flat. "Be a receptionist?"

The sky was beginning to darken. I drove back to Collier

Reclamations, Inc. By now the streets were empty, mostly. It didn't take long. This time I made myself a drink, drained it, then made another. I took it to the desk and pulled the phone toward me. The operator at County General Hospital connected me with Harry's room.

"Yeah?" he answered.

"Nicko's sister," I said. "Did you really do that artwork on her face, Harry?"

"Artwork?" he said impatiently. "Oh, that. She's nothing, Clyde, a whore. But what about my offer? You didn't call the cops, did you?"

I said, "Hey, have they broken down your door yet?"

Harry let a pent-up breath escape, then laughed. "Not yet they haven't, pal."

I hung up the phone. Then I called Wiscowski. He answered on the first ring. Where'd you find the gun? I stared out Harry's office window. In a car.

Could I come down to the station? Sure. Give me a half hour.

The typewriter was a fancy electric job with more buttons than I knew what to do with. I found the on-off switch, though, and a blank sheet of paper with Harry's letterhead. He still owed me fifty bucks, I figured. My bank, and some similar institutions, owed me, too. What I owed was nine more car payments.

I started typing. "Regarding the 1986 Chevrolet Chevette registered to Mr. Clyde Stone," I wrote. "I have been unable to locate the vehicle in question. In my opinion, it would be a waste of my valuable time and your money to ..."

All in all, it was a good-looking letter, right down to my forgery of Harry's signature. I found an envelope and stamp, then mailed it on my way downtown.

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## **SOLUTION TO THE APRIL "UNSOLVED":**

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The sign language communication said in effect: "The fourth house from here in the direction pointed by the arrow will be attacked on the night when the moon is next in its fourth quarter." By this means, the leader of the band sought recruits, or set the date.

FICTION

# Deke's Clown

by Steve Barancik



**P**eople like to gather with people who do the same things, and we convenience store clerks are no exception. There's a certain table at a certain bar here in town, where, no matter the time of

day, you can find clerks after shift winding down. The conversation often, quite naturally; turns to holdups. (Every convenience clerk has his share of such tales from the front.) It's not often that Deke Bravido-



vich stops by, and even less often that he opens up. But when he does—well, it's a heck of a story. I remember the first time I heard it.

I was restationed over to Third and Wentworth (says Deke), Store 671. Nice full-service operation: gas pumps, cash machine, video rental . . . the works. Low crime area. They told me it'd been three years since the last holdup, and that by two teenage girls. Probably stole a *Seventeen*, wielding sharpened eyeliner pencils, right? I'd been transferred from 432—yeah, West Manley—where everybody looks like they pack a piece. I was looking forward to an uninterrupted string of legal transactions.

And that's what I got . . . for awhile. Then, on Friday night, I was working graveyard. About two in the morning. A guy came in wearing a clown mask, so he was hip to the camera. Now, I've been robbed by guys in Richard Nixon masks, Jimmy Carter masks, Ronald Reagan masks, Freddy Krueger masks—all the same thing, if you ask me—but this clown mask was, well, disconcerting. It was smiling, but the way it *kept* smiling—there was something gruesome about that. Naturally I hit the silent alarm as soon as I saw the mask, but standard operating procedure

was no use. Six seventy-one, as I was to find out, is right on a precinct line, four miles from either station; and, as if that weren't bad enough, *five* miles from the nearest doughnut shop.

The guy was a little nervous, but he knew what he was doing. He was holding something under his coat, pointing it at me, didn't claim it was a gun. If he got caught, no one was gonna pin armed robbery on him, right? I asked him what he had under there, just like they teach you in training. "A salmon," he said, real dry. Late night, I was a little giddy. I couldn't help letting out a giggle.

Whatever nervousness he'd been feeling disappeared as soon as he'd had the opportunity to crack wise. "Empty the register, Bozo," he said, as if I were the one wearing the clown mask. I did what he said, just like you're supposed to. He kept the salmon pointed right at my ribs. "Put it all in a bag," he directed while I scooped the bills out.

"Paper or plastic?" I asked. Force of habit.

"Paper," he answered emphatically. "Anything that doesn't biodegrade oughta be illegal." He shook his head sadly, like he was pondering the fate of the world. "You really shouldn't even offer plastic."

All the holdup artists in the world, I had to get an environ-



mentally sound one.

Well, that was the end of that . . . I thought. I figured it'd be another three or four years until the next holdup at Third and Wentworth. But no, my wisecracking buddy seemed to have decided that if no one else was going to take advantage of the wide range of opportunities available at 671, then he was. He came back about five weeks later, wearing the same mask.

"Looks like the circus is back in town," I mumbled as I hit the silent alarm, confident that the cops would show up within the next couple of hours or so.

Of course I couldn't see his face under the mask, but I swear to you he smiled when he realized I remembered him.

He remembered me, too. "Bozo!" he said, as if he were greeting a long lost high school buddy. As if no one else ever bothered to recognize him.

I pointed to my nametag. "Deke," I corrected him.

"Deke, Bozo, what's the difference?" he laughed. He was a lot more leisurely in his pace than last time. Maybe I could stall him until the cops actually arrived. Seems like corporate promotes anyone that helps catch one of these guys, as long as you don't try to do it with force. Liability, you know. Too bad they don't let us pack a piece.

"What's *your* name?" I asked sarcastically. Like he was going to tell me.

He considered. "Ray F. Sunshine," he said. "Good name for a clown, huh?" He finally noticed that I hadn't even opened the cash register yet. "You can work while we talk," he said, gesturing with his salmon.

"I see you still have your friend under there." I started removing the money slowly. "What's his name: Stinky?"

"Very good, Bozo," said Ray, appreciative of my humor. "Don't forget the paper bag."

I loaded it up and sent him on his way. As he headed out the door with his earnings, he turned to me as if there were something important that he felt needed saying.

He cocked his masked head slightly to the side. "I *like* robbing from you," he said.

He sprinted off before I even had the opportunity to say thanks.

And Ray *did* like robbing from me. He did so every month or two, on no particular schedule, but always during my shift. He didn't do it often enough that the cops would consider staking the place out or that the store would hire any extra security. After all, even though this was a virtual crime wave for 671, there were other stores that got robbed three times as often. Still, from my point of

view, there was something especially irksome about being robbed each time by the same guy. After a while you start to feel like that team that travels with the Harlem Globetrotters.

The cops really liked to rub it in. "Was he alone, or were there thirty of them packed in a Volkswagen?" Funny guys.

After about five or six incidents I began to get fed up. I know it's not like it was *my* money, but there's something about a guy taking advantage of the system time and time again, especially when *you* are representing the system. I'd never taken my job home with me before, but I was getting obsessed. Nightmares: clowns popping out of cash registers like jack-in-the-boxes; salmon strolling the aisles and complaining about soft drinks not having enough bubbles. I wasn't scared, mind you, but I certainly was frustrated. I wanted to catch the guy.

All day and night I would figure and plot. He never drove up to the store, but maybe he was parking a car nearby. I could run after him, try to spot a license plate, but as you know, leaving the store means breaking corporate rule number one. And what if Stinky was cold steel, not cold fish?

You name it, I thought of it. I got so fed up with Ray's irregular visitations that I took to

shorting him a few bills. If he wasn't looking too closely I would pocket a five and put it back in the register after he had gone. Anything, just to feel *I'd* taken advantage of *him* for once. Still, nothing changed the fact that Ray was outearning me. That was what I resented the most.

Watching a detective show on TV behind the counter one night, it occurred to me to mark the bills. I spent the next hour writing 671 in the upper right-hand corner of each bill in the register. Every time someone paid, I'd six seventy-one the bills. Ray would eventually steal the bills, and, if I was lucky, he'd be a regular customer of the store, and eventually he'd give the bills back to me. I'd have my clown.

Great idea, let me tell you. The kind of idea you get on graveyard. I'd forgotten that I give half the bills back out as change. Two days hadn't passed before I got the first marked bill back . . . from an old lady on crutches. Fortunately, I checked the impulse to tackle her. Ray hadn't even robbed me in the interim. You know, I still see some of those 671 bills every once in a while.

Still, a better idea came to me as a result of that ill-conceived one. Next time Ray robbed me, I'd memorize the serial number on one of the bills.

During his next visit I managed to memorize the numbers on a five—memorized them until this day in fact: L33236775B. I was grinning like an idiot when the cops showed up. And well I should have been. When I told them I'd memorized the serial number on a five dollar bill and that now they could alert retailers citywide to the bill's significance as evidence, they laughed . . . very hard.

And the robberies went on. I even remember Ray strolling the aisles one evening as I emptied the cash register, asking me what was a good brand of microwave dinner and decrying the amount of packaging wrapped around food. "Don't they know there's a landfill crisis?" he mumbled disgustedly.

After about a year and a half, I began to accept Ray's holdups with a certain sense of inevitability. I took the attitude of: I'm doing my job, he's doing his. He'd come in, say, "Hey, Bozo," and I'd look up from my crossword puzzle. I'd say, "Hey, Ray," maybe even ask him for help on a word. We'd make casual conversation while I filled up his paper bag. It was anywhere from two to eight weeks between Ray's visits, so every time he showed up it was essentially a surprise, like a down-the-street neighbor that you know you'll run into at irregular intervals.

One night he came in and, while filling his bag, I pointed out a product that still had me chuckling, sitting right there next to the dried beef sticks. "Check it out," I said.

He gasped when he saw the shrink-wrapped dill pickles, selling at seventy-five cents per, complete with labeling informing you that they were, indeed, pickles.

"Plastic-packaged pickles," he moaned disbelievingly. "Man thinks *everything* oughta come in its own placenta."

Pretty deep for a holdup man, huh? When I handed him his bag full of money, he pulled out a five and stuffed it in my breast pocket. "You're okay, Bozo," he said, as if grateful to me for being a kindred spirit of sorts. "See you next time," he called from the door.

Of course I put the five back in the cash register. The police showed up about fifteen minutes later to fill out the twentieth report of its kind—and to make fun of me.

"Lemme guess," said cop number one. "A guy in a clown mask."

I rolled my eyes and nodded my head tiredly. I was beginning to think it was this humiliating experience that followed every one of his holdups that I held Ray most accountable for.

"Carrying something under

his jacket," said cop number two, "that you couldn't say for sure was a gun."

"Possibly a fish," I mumbled.

"What'd you say?"

"Nothing," I answered.

Cop number one chimed back in. "You really oughta carry some fresh doughnuts."

Ray's next visit came some six weeks later. I'd come up with a plan. "Yo, Bozo!" he said on his way-in.

"Mr. Sunshine," I said, trying to remain calm. I'd played the whole scene over in my head a hundred times. If I could stay cool enough, I figured I had a good chance of making it work.

"Whaddya got for me tonight?" he said, parking an elbow on the counter.

"Let's see," I said, opening the cash register. "Pretty good," I remarked. Then, casual as can be, I said, "Remember the pickle? Check out the magazine stand."

"Magazines?" he said, wondering what could possibly interest him on the order of a plasticized dill.

As soon as he headed to the other end of the store, I swept into action. I took a ten and a five out of my wallet and stuffed them into the cash register. I ripped a string of fifteen Scratch 'n' Score lottery tickets off the spool, folded and flattened them, and dropped them into a paper bag. Then I reached over the

counter and underhanded the bag onto the floor just in front of Aisle 2.

Ray exclaimed from the magazine stand. "Now they gotta protect *words* from the outside air?"

He strolled back towards me and the register, shaking his head with disgust. Our store was part of a pilot program from corporate, shrink-wrapping all the magazines closed so the customers couldn't read them without paying for them.

"One of these days," said Ray, "I'm gonna come in here and find *you* in plastic."

"Sure enough," I said, finishing stacking the money on the counter and approaching the crucial part of my plan. "Hey, Ray," I said, pointing, "some pig of a customer left that bag on the floor. I'm not allowed to come around from the counter. You mind picking it up for me?"

"No sweat," said Ray. He grabbed it and handed it to me, saying, "Just stuff my money in this one. We all gotta do our part, huh?"

"Absolutely," I said, concealing a grin, stuffing the money in on top of the lottery tickets.

"See you soon, Bozo," said Ray on the way out the door.

Sooner than you think, I said to myself.

Well, you know how the Scratch 'n' Score tickets work. Ads say "One out of three's a

winner," even if all you do is win another ticket. I figured that by giving Ray fifteen tickets he'd be sure to have at least one winner—probably more like five. He had no reason to suspect that I was setting him up, since he'd figure some dumb customer had simply left all his lottery tickets on the floor.

Once he'd left, I figured out from the next lottery ticket on the spool what the serial numbers on the previous fifteen were and wrote them down. As you know, you have to redeem your winners, except for the big ones, at the store of purchase. The address is stamped right on the back, just above the rules. The only other option is sending the tickets in to the state. I hoped Ray would save himself the stamp. After all, I wasn't going to tell the cops to have people watch out for serial numbers again. I told the other 671 shift clerks to keep an eye out for those tickets, and that if someone came in to redeem them they should treat it like business as usual—except that after the customer left they should put the ticket aside for me to see. Most important, they should make *sure* he filled out his name and address in the appropriate space at the bottom of the ticket to be eligible for the second-chance drawing.

As it turned out, Ray did bring his winning tickets back

to the store, and he did so while I was on shift. What is it they say about criminals and the scene of the crime? A thrill ran up and down me when I recognized the ticket numbers. He was just a sad-looking guy, maybe a little bitter—might have looked slightly familiar. Not well off, despite the cash he was bringing in at my expense. Didn't say a word. I can't say he looked like what I expected him to look like, but in hindsight he looked just about right. I didn't say anything to him right then and there, and I may have felt a twinge of remorse. I just handled the transaction as with any other customer, handing him a five dollar bill and three fresh tickets to cover the four that he handed me. Sure enough, he filled out his real name and address on the back, though I still prefer to think of him as Ray. I could actually see the shabby apartment building he lived in from where I was standing, and I pictured some mean, ugly, sociopath of a woman who would relieve him of his earnings the second he walked in the door.

"Have a nice day," I said as he was leaving, just as corporate tells you to.

"And yourself," he mumbled without turning around. The voice didn't sound familiar, but that would have been due to the distorting effects of the mask.

I called the police before I could think twice to regret it, and they dilly-dallied right over to make the arrest. I didn't have half the sense of triumph I thought I would have. And ... well ... I guess you could say the story ends there.

But something in Deke's voice said the story *didn't* end there, that Deke only wished it did.

"Was there a trial?" someone asked.

"Well, yeah, there was a trial," Deke answered.

"Did you testify?"

"Yep," Deke replied grimly.

The rest of us looked at each other, wanting the story to go on. Wanting to revel with Deke in convenience-clerk triumph.

"And was he found guilty?"

"He was found guilty."

"Sentenced?"

"Six months."

Getting all this out of Deke was like pulling teeth. His reticence led us to imagine that something terrible had happened. Perhaps Ray F. Sunshine had died there in jail.

"And Ray—"

"Is doing just fine, thank you," Deke practically snapped.

"So you saw him again?"

A pause. Deke looked at each of us in turn and determined, no doubt, that the questions would keep coming. He took a deep breath. "See, there was one more winning ticket."

Every other mouth at the table dropped open.

"No," said Deke, "not the million dollar jackpot. Just a paltry fifty thousand."

"Congratulations!" we echoed each other, finally understanding Deke's reluctance. Obviously, if we knew he'd won fifty thousand dollars, we'd expect him to pay for a round or three.

"Ray got to keep the money."

A hush. "But you bought the ticket."

"The judge said it was a gift, by definition, that I gave to Ray. Even though I paid for it, it wasn't as if I had dropped it on the floor by mistake. And the back of the ticket states very clearly, 'This is a bearer instrument.'"

Everyone chipped in for Deke's drinks.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

# —A Matter— —of Goblins—

by Michael Innes



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

“You’re sure it’s uninhabited?” Sir John Appleby peered ahead rather apprehensively as the car moved slowly over the uneven track. “There isn’t a resident squire? The Pooles are one of those families that have entirely evaporated from the English scene?”

“How inquiring you turn when we have a small job of trespass on hand.” Lady Appleby pressed firmly on the accelerator. “I don’t know why even an eminent policeman need be so law-abiding. As for the Pooles, I believe there are plenty of them.”

“But not here? Look out for that cow.”

“Not here. I don’t know that Water Poole ought to be called uninhabited. That, to my mind, suggests ruins and generations of emptiness. But I understand that it’s certainly unoccupied and beginning to tumble to pieces. You’ll see for yourself.”

“You mean we’re to go *in*?”

“Of course. That’s always the real fun. There’ll be a window.”

Appleby groaned. “Judith, my dear, I foresee it all. Indeed, it has happened again and again. We break in. We cover ourselves with dust and cobweb. We twist our ankles in rotting floorboards. And then the man comes.”

“Nonsense.”

“We hear him approaching with a sinister limp. He is simply some cottager told off to keep an eye on the place. But we are petrified. You are even more terror-struck than I am. Your bravado deserts you. Out of compassion for your pitiable condition, I consent to our hiding in a cupboard. And there the man finds us.”

“I never heard such rot. Such a thing has never happened to us. Or only once.”

“I rattle my small change loudly in my pocket and assume an air of jaunty patronage. The good old man—”

“The what?”

“That’s what he is. The good old man fails to hear the half-crowns. He is unaware of my manner, which I myself distinguish with piercing clarity as indistinguishable from that of numerous petty criminals of my acquaintance. But he does recognize both your accent and your clothes as virtually identical with those of the late squire’s dear old mother—”

“I think you’re abominable.”

“And so—in a humiliating sort of way—all is well, and we are shown round and offered a lot of inaccurate antiquarian information. As we leave, I give the good old man five shillings. He touches his hat respectfully—to you.”

"Then that's all right." Judith Appleby slowed down to avoid another cow. "It looks to me as if there has been a car along here already today."

"I'd say there have been several." Appleby picked up a map. "And that's odd, for this certainly leads to the manor house and no farther. And it's curious, by the way, that a place of some apparent consequence should never have run to a better approach."

"It may have been less primitive at one time. And, of course, they always had the river." Judith pointed to a line of poplars in the middle distance. "It's quite navigable from here to where it joins the Thames, and probably some of the heavy stuff used to come and go by water. But one of the fascinating things about Water Poole, I gather, is just its remarkable isolation. There's really nothing for miles . . . And there it is."

They had swung round a clump of beech trees still in their freshest green, and now the venerable Elizabethan house was directly in front of them. Involuntarily, they both exclaimed in dismay. Water Poole was a larger place than they had expected, and much more nearly ruinous. Approaching from this aspect, one might have supposed some labor of demolition to be in progress—had one not become aware at the same time of absolute solitude and silence.

The ground plan of the building appeared to be the familiar Tudor H. And one of the end pavilions—it must in fact have constituted a stack of handsome rooms—had come down in a mass of rubble which spread far across the derelict open courtyard before them. Already the tumbled stone and plaster was in part overgrown with hemlock and thistle. And high up, incongruously reminiscent of bomb damage in a London square, they could see a single slice of an angustly paneled apartment, with swallows nesting under the narrow strip of ceiling that remained to it. Elsewhere the long grey façade, which for centuries had faced this empty landscape with a mellow confidence, was flaked and cracked and crumbling round gaping windows and below a broken balustrade. It had been a noble dwelling—and now its whole appearance was so forlorn and disgraced that Appleby had the feeling of having committed an unseemly intrusion. Even the hum of the car seemed an impertinence. The same impression must have come to Judith, for she slipped out of gear and switched off the engine. They glided forward silently into the embracing silence of the place. It was like a physical medium receiving them and covering them, as if they had been swimmers plunging without a ripple into a deep still

lake.

"Somebody told me it was occupied during the war—shared by two families." Unconsciously Judith had lowered her voice, as one might do in the presence of some meditating sage. "But it looks far too ruinous for that."

"There's plenty of it, and matters mayn't be so bad on the other side."

"But they've plainly let it go. Nobody is hoping ever to bring it to life again." Judith stopped the car and they got out. "It's enormous. And that's made it too stiff a commitment for whatever Pooles remain."

Appleby nodded. "Certainly it's on the large side. Indeed, it's more like one of the showplaces put up by Elizabeth's great courtiers than a run-of-the-mill manor house. Who are these Pooles?"

"An old family, I believe, taking their name from this part of the shire, and giving it to the house when they built it. They met disaster in the Civil War; a father and two sons all killed at Naseby. Now, I imagine, they are impoverished, and quite insignificant as well. Shall we go ahead?" Judith, as she asked this question, was already in vigorous forward motion.

"There will be no harm in walking round the gardens." Appleby put forward this proposition not very hopefully. "But undoubtedly it lays us open to misconception."

"We might be taken for thieves?" Judith was amused. "I don't see much that we could make away with."

"There's probably thousands of pounds' worth of lead on the roof." Appleby stopped suddenly. "I wonder if somebody *has* been after that? The ground suggests a good deal of recent coming and going. Or perhaps people help themselves to loads of that rubble. It could be useful in all sorts of ways. We'll go round the house and down to the river."

For some seconds they walked on without speaking. Even in the clear light and gentle warmth of this early morning in June there was something insistently depressing about Water Poole in its last long agony. They climbed by insecure and treacherous steps to a moldering terrace fast disappearing under a lush growth of summer weeds. They passed between the side of the house and a large formal garden which was now mere wilderness. And presently they came to the river frontage. "Why," Judith exclaimed, "it is better—ever so much better. It's almost cheerful."

"I don't know that I'd go as far as that. But at least they've cut the grass. Odd, perhaps—but meritorious."

On this side too the house was elevated behind a terrace, and between the terrace and the river lay a broad expanse of turf. This was not in good condition, but it had certainly been recently mown with some care. Judith looked at it in perplexity. "I suppose it's a gallant attempt to make a decent show. But who's to see it? No one would bring a sail up here, and it's decidedly remote for canoes or punts. . . . The fabric's better, too."

Appleby turned. The house as viewed from this angle was plainly in disastrous disrepair, but it bore no suggestion of falling to pieces. The terrace here was in tolerable order, the windows were either glazed or decently shuttered, and under a massive portico a stout oak door appeared firmly shut. Rather to his wife's surprise, Appleby led the way across the grass and climbed a broad flight of steps that rose to the house between battered statues. "Weeded," he said. "And they don't tilt disconcertingly when you tread on them." He stopped. "Patched up, after a fashion." He reached the terrace, walked to the oak door and tried it. "Locked." And this time, to Judith's positive astonishment, he gave it an impatient rattle. "Shades of Dr. Johnson's father."

"Dr. Johnson's father, John?"

"Don't you remember? Every night old Michael Johnson went out and locked with great care the front door of a building which no longer had any back to it. Young Sam was afraid he was going off his head. Well, Water Poole has a back rather like that. So if we *do* want to go inside there's no particular difficulty. We just go round to the other side again."

"Then here goes—and I believe you're quite as curious as I am."

"It's the place that's curious—not me." For a moment Appleby turned to glance again at the river. It was no more than a stream, but he judged it to hold promise of excellent trout. "And as for that lawn—" He broke off, and they returned to the back of the house in silence.

On this side the terrace half obscured a basement floor of cellars and offices, and into these they walked without hindrance. For a time they wandered among flagged chambers and passages, either vaulted or with plaster ceilings most of which now lay on the floors. Here and there were vast fireplaces, cumbersome stone troughs, gloomy larders and pantries with massive slate shelves on a scale suggesting a morgue. Nothing movable was to be seen—except in one obscure recess a heap of brushwood disposed into a rough bed, with signs of a small fire nearby, as if a tramp of the more pronouncedly melancholic sort had recently chosen this congenial spot

for temporary residence. It was clear that in modern times the house when occupied must have achieved more practicable domestic arrangements on the next floor. And to this the Applebys presently climbed. So far, it had all been most depressing, and Judith's whole exploration appeared to hold every promise of ending in mere dismalness. Appleby endeavored to enliven the proceedings by affecting to hear the threatening approach of the man. His wife, however, was not amused.

But upstairs it was different. The great hall was a stately place, with high mullioned windows looking towards the river, a fine linen-fold paneling which must have been older than the house itself, and an elaborately ribbed plaster vaulting with pendants. These last had mostly broken off, and the effect was oddly like one of those caves or grottoes in which eighteenth century gentlemen amused themselves by shooting down the stalactites. But to an eye failing to travel so high as this the impression was less of decay than of suspended animation. Here was the very heart of the house, and it still faintly beat. It seemed only to be awaiting some prompting occasion to pulse more strongly, until the place felt the quickening flood in all its enchanted limbs, and stirred and breathed again.

Judith paced the length of the hall from screen to dais, and there stood quite still, as if she were listening. When she came back her expression had changed. "It's queer," she said. "There's something."

"Something?"

"Don't you feel it?" She smiled at him, faintly puzzled. "But of course you don't. It's not your line."

"If you mean ghosts and whatnot, I didn't know it was your line either."

"Not quite ghosts. Unless—yes—a throng of ghosts. I have a feeling of time shutting up, telescoping. Our time and theirs. So that they were here—and have all gone away—only today or yesterday."

Appleby was examining on the great carved screen a fine series of panels exhibiting the motive of an arch in perspective. "My dear girl, who are 'they'?"

"I don't know." She laughed at her own absurdity. "Gentlemen adventurers bound for the Spanish Main. Cavaliers riding away to join Prince Rupert or the king. If we had been just a little earlier we might have seen them. They forded the river, I think and rode away at dawn."

"You ought to have gone in for historical novels, not for sculpture."

But—talking of that—look at the chimneypiece. It's rather good, in a florid way."

They studied it for some minutes: an affair of Hermes-figures dolphins and cupids, surmounted by an ornate heraldic carving. "It's odd about names," Judith said. "They don't go in for a pool, but a pole." She pointed to this element in the elaborate coat of arms that crowned the structure. "But what's that piece of carving lower down? I'd say it's been added later."

"It's another pole—chopped in two by a sword. What's called an emblem, rather than heraldry proper. And there's a motto. No—it's simply a date. Can you see?"

"Yes." There was clear sunlight in the hall, and Judith had no difficulty. What she read was:

*y<sup>e</sup> 14 June  
1645*

Appleby thought for a moment. "Naseby, in fact. The Pooles were in no doubt about that battle's being the end of them."

"And this is the tenth."

"The tenth?" He was at a loss.

"Of June. Four days to the anniversary. No wonder—" She broke off. "John, there's somebody coming. There really is, this time."

Appleby listened. There could be no doubt about the advancing footsteps. "Then we go through with it, as usual. Unless, of course, it's not the man, but a ghost. One of Prince Rupert's friends, say, who forgot some weapons—or some piece of finery—and has come back for it."

"What nonsense we talk. But there *is* something queer."

"I rather agree."

They looked at each other for a moment in whimsical alarm, before turning expectantly to the far end of the hall, from which the sound came. In a dark doorway beyond the dais they glimpsed what for an instant might have been identified as a gleam of armor. And then they saw that it was human hair. Advancing upon them was a silver-haired clergyman. He was carrying in his arms a square wooden box; he walked gingerly to a window embrasure and set down his burden, then he turned to inspect the Applebys over the top of small and uncertainly poised steel-rimmed spectacles. "Good morning," he said politely. "So you are before me, after all."

Appleby took a hand from his trousers pocket—it was clear that



no five shillings would be called for—and contrived a polite bow. “Good morning, sir. But I don’t think—”

“How quickly these things get about nowadays. I am most surprised. But, of course, your Society is always on the *qui-vive*—decidedly on the *qui-vive*.”

“I’m really afraid I don’t know what Society you are talking about.”

“Come, come—frankness, my dear sir, frankness.” The old clergyman shook his head disapprovingly, so that his silver locks shimmered in the thin clear sunlight which flooded the hall. “The lady and yourself indubitably come from the Society of Psychical Research.”

“You are wholly mistaken. If I come from anywhere, it’s from the Metropolitan Police. But my visit here is entirely private—and, I’m afraid, unauthorized. My wife—” and Appleby looked at Judith with some shade of malice “—is keenly interested in old houses.”

“We must get to work.” The old clergyman appeared to make very little of Appleby’s remarks. “But first let me introduce myself. My name is Buttery—Horace Buttery—and I have been the incumbent of this parish for many years.”

“How do you do.” Appleby presented Mr. Buttery to Judith with appropriate formality. “I wonder if you will tell us what it is that you suppose to have got about?”

“I’m bound to say that I had come to regard it as a vanishing legend. For good or ill, these old stories are dying out.” Mr. Buttery advanced to the chimneypiece and peered up at the carving. “The date is about right, you must agree.”

“The date is certainly about right.” It was Judith who replied, and Appleby realized with misgiving that she was determined to probe the intentions or persuasions of the old parson before them. “Today is the tenth of June.”

“Quite so.” Mr. Buttery, much gratified, nodded so vigorously that his spectacles appeared likely to fly from his nose. “But I have heard very little talk of it, you know, of recent years. Only now and then, and from the older cottagers. The younger people—and it is they, mark you, who are often out late at night, human nature being what it is—the younger people never report anything. Perhaps because they don’t expect anything—eh? But then, of course, I’m bound to say I didn’t expect anything myself. It was entirely a surprise. My mind, naturally, was entirely on the gamekeeper.”

“I beg your pardon?” Judith was puzzled.

“No matter, no matter.” Mr. Buttery might have been supposed

momentarily confused. "The point is that I have seen it with my own eyes. And so I feel bound to get to work." He turned back to his wooden box. "As you do too. Well, our purposes are not the same, but there need be no conflict—no conflict at all. A great deal in our present ills, if you ask me, proceeds from this disastrous notion of a necessary conflict between religion and science. I have a very cogent sermon on the subject, and I find that there is un-failing interest in it, year by year. I am not without the thought, indeed, of printing it and sending a copy to the bishop. Between you and me, it might do him good. But here we are, here we are." Mr. Buttery was now rummaging in his box. "Bell, book, candle—surely I didn't forget the candle? No—here it is."

Judith advanced and peered into the box. "You are proposing some sort of exorcism?"

"Precisely. Not that I consider the manifestation as serious." Again Mr. Buttery glanced up with an air of great acuteness—which had, somehow, the comical effect of exhibiting him as a very innocent man. "I am not at all sure that a single White Paternoster might not very adequately meet the case. Still, one ought to be on the safe side. My reading inclines me to the view that we are dealing with goblins. A really populous affair like this is commonly a matter of goblins. I have little doubt that we shall get the better of them."

"Do I understand—" Appleby in his turn had come forward—"that you yourself have lately seen at Water Poole a considerable concourse of what you took to be disembodied spirits?"

"My dear sir, you are perfectly justified from your scientific point of view in beginning your inquiry in this purely objective fashion. But I am persuaded that you know very well what I saw here last night."

"Can you put a name on it?"

"Of course I can. It was the Naseby Ball."

"Exactly—the Naseby Ball. And—as you can imagine—we are extremely interested." Appleby gave Judith a swift glance which might have been an injunction to accept without more ado the role of psychical researcher. "It would be invaluable if you were good enough to give us a full account of your experience."

"By all means." Mr. Buttery picked up his bell, gave it what appeared to be an experimental tinkle, and then addressed himself courteously to meet this request. "The historical background of the legend is no doubt familiar to you. In the summer of 1645 Lady Elizabeth Poole—she was a daughter of the Earl of Warmington—

gave a magnificent entertainment here at Water Poole. On any sober calculation, of course, it was no time for anything of the sort, and the ball was clearly intended as a gesture in the grand manner. The Pooles prized nothing more highly than their reputation for being both resourceful and gay—and indeed they are said to be so still. But it took this great aristocratic lady, perhaps, to light that particular beacon against the darkness that was then closing in on the king's party." Mr. Buttery paused. "One admires it, does one not?"

"And remembers it." Judith glanced down the hall as if attempting to picture the scene. "And that is the point, I imagine? Lady Elizabeth's entertainment became legendary?"

"So it would appear. On the stroke of midnight, the story goes, a messenger arrived from Prince Rupert. He announced that Sir Thomas Fairfax was marching with the New Model army upon Northampton, and that in a few days a critical battle must be joined. The ball ended instantly with a loyal toast, there was a bustle of martial preparation, and at daybreak the gentlemen rode away." Again Mr. Buttery paused. "How vividly one sees it; the candles growing pale in the dawn, the women ashen under their paint and jewels, the men all assurance and arrogance and inflexibly maintained courtesy, but with thoughts only for their horses and weapons and accoutrements. Among those who departed were Richard Poole and his two sons. As you no doubt know, none of them came back."

"And the family never recovered?"

Mr. Buttery nodded his venerable head. "It is perhaps true to say that the family never completely recovered—although Pooles lived on, the unquestioned masters of this place, into the present century. In the Kaiser's war the old history repeated itself after a fashion, for a father and two sons were killed, and the estate became impossibly burdened with debt. No Poole has lived here regularly since then. During the last war, when remote places were at a premium, Water Poole was let out and partially occupied for a time. But now it scarcely appears that it can ever be lived in again, and I am sorry to say that the shooting and fishing have been leased to some very unpleasant people—commercial folks, no doubt—from London. The present owner of the house is almost unknown to me. He is a young man in his early thirties—a Richard, as most of the lords of the manor have been christened—and I believe he has gone on the stage."

"I wonder what Lady Elizabeth Poole would make of that? To

think of one of her descendants becoming a common player would probably make her turn in the grave." Judith looked at Mr. Buttery with sudden indiscreet mischief. "But perhaps it's that sort of thing that Lady Elizabeth is by way of doing—turning in her grave, or even rising from it on stated occasions to dance a pavane or a saraband?"

Mr. Buttery shook his head. "No, no, my dear madam. That is an error—I am bound to say a grave error." He picked up his bell again and tinkled it, as if there was something in itself calling for the rite in which he proposed to engage. "We must not suppose that the souls of virtuous persons, or their bodies either, engage in any such pranks. We are not in any sense confronted with true apparitions. Goblins are the explanation. I have not the slightest doubt of it."

"It is a most interesting supposition." Appleby interposed this with gravity. "But just *what* do they explain? You haven't yet told us that. We have only gathered, so far, that last night you witnessed something remarkable. How did it happen? Were you called out to it?"

"Not precisely." For the third time Mr. Buttery tinkled his bell, but on this occasion what appeared to prompt the action was mild discomfiture. "The fact is that, round about midnight, I was on the river. For purposes of meditation, and on a fine summer night, it may confidently be recommended."

"Particularly when there is no moon?"

"Oh, most decidedly so. There is a great deal of distraction in a handsome moon."

"I see." Appleby felt constrained to conclude that—astonishing as the fact must seem—this reverend old parson's nocturnal occasions were not unconnected with possessing himself of other people's trout. Perhaps Mr. Buttery was an instance of the shocking poverty of the rural clergy prompting to a life of crime. Perhaps he simply derived entertainment from outwitting, with arts learnt in boyhood, those unpleasant commercial people from London. "And being on the river, sir, you saw this special ball?"

"I did indeed."

"I believe you said that the occurrence of something of the sort is a traditional belief among some of the older people in these parts. Perhaps you had been thinking of it yourself?"

"Decidedly not. My walk from the rectory to the river is by a path from which there is some view of the back of the house, and I could just dimly distinguish its outline against the sky. I recall

simply reflecting how lonely and deserted it seemed."

"There were no lights?"

"None. Anything of the sort would have attracted my attention and interest at once. For the astonishing spectacle which I saw later I was utterly unprepared. It came upon me, indeed, with the suddenness of a *coup de théâtre*." Mr. Buttery paused upon this phrase with some satisfaction. "I was dropping quietly—I may say very quietly—down the stream in my dinghy. My thoughts were occupied with—um—entirely other matters. In fact I was meditating—" Mr. Buttery, who seemed to feel that verisimilitude and conviction called here for more specific statement, visibly paused for inspiration—"I was meditating upon the mutability of human affairs."

"A very proper subject for reflection, sir. And then?"

"I came round the little bend that brings Water Poole into view. It was all lit up."

"All?"

"Certainly this hall and its adjacent apartments. And there were lights on the terrace and I think the lawn. I was extremely startled."

"Naturally. And what was your first thought?"

Mr. Buttery considered. "It must appear very absurd now—but undoubtedly it was of my own situation. I was struck by the impropriety and—er—inexplicability of my dropping down, at that hour, upon some private occasion. And then I realized that there could be no private occasion. For Water Poole, as you have yourselves seen, is an empty shell. Indeed, there could be no natural explanation whatever. And as soon as I had made this reflection, I noticed the peculiar character of the light. It was *not* that of a normally illuminated mansion."

"Have you ever seen this particular mansion lit up before?"

"Certainly—although it is now long ago. As you may notice, there is an old electrical installation of sorts. But the light last night was utterly different."

Appleby had walked to a window and was looking out thoughtfully over the lawn and the stream beyond. "Can you describe it?" he asked.

"A low, soft, golden light. The effect was strikingly beautiful."

"I see. And you have reason to believe that goblins command that sort of thing?" Appleby put this question with gravity. "I am myself inclined to think of goblins as restricted to glow-worms. But glow-worms would scarcely be equal to the job."

"Decidedly not. Glow-worms could not possibly illuminate a large

party of ladies and gentlemen."

"And that was what you saw?"

"That was what I appeared to see. And I need scarcely remark that their costume was Caroline. It would not be correct to say that the effect was as of a canvas by Van Dyck—since, you see, from my point of view, it was all in miniature and in open air. But if you may suppose Van Dyck to have painted something in the manner of Watteau's *fêtes champêtres* you have the impression exactly." Mr. Buttery smiled ingenuously over this triumph of precision. "I may perhaps be permitted to mention that I possess a great love of the visual arts."

"No doubt." Appleby was looking at the old clergyman in some perplexity. "Did you think to study this particular example at closer quarters?"

"I must confess that I did not. There they were—Caroline ladies and gentlemen strolling on the terrace and across the lawn. Behind them—here in this hall—I had an impression of dancing, and strains of music were definitely detectable. My mental state was peculiar. I recollected the circumstances of Lady Elizabeth's ball but not, oddly enough, the legend of its periodical reenactment. As is so frequently the case during an actual encounter with supernatural appearances, no thought of the supernatural formed itself clearly in my head. I accused myself of inebriety."

"It is a thought that might come to anyone. But I am sure there was no justification for it."

"Reflection shows me that there was not. It is true that I had ventured upon a glass of burgundy at dinner, followed by a little madeira. But I hardly consider—"

"Plainly it is not a supposition with which you need distress yourself." Appleby contrived a stern glance at Judith, who was displaying some signs of amusement at this exhibition of her husband's professional manner. "Did you think of anything else?"

"Certainly. I thought of those two Oxford ladies—learned and sensible women, they appear to have been—who believed themselves to have had an adventure with time at Versailles. You no doubt recall their story. They saw Marie Antoinette. It seemed possible that I had met a similar kink in the centuries and was back with the real Lady Elizabeth Poole."

"I believe there's decidedly something in that." It was Judith who interposed, and she spoke with decision. "It goes with what I felt myself when I entered this hall. It goes with what I *still* feel." She gave her husband a glance of some defiance. "Time has been

squashed up like a concertina, and it's only just expanding again to the dimensions familiar to us. I fancy that—ever so faintly—I can hear the music now. I fancy I can hear those people: the sound of their voices and the rustle of their silks. And I *know* I can smell them."

"Smell them?" Appleby was positively startled by this primitive assertion.

"Yes, John. The powdered hair. The scents—their scents. And their mere seventeenth century humanity too. Mr. Buttery caught them and we just missed them. I'm sure of it."

"I think Mr. Buttery was not without a feeling that they might catch him." Appleby offered this rather dryly. "Isn't it so, sir?"

For a moment Mr. Buttery looked quite startled. And then he blandly smiled. "I must confess to having been under that uneasiness. I should hate to be caught. By goblins, that is to say. Not unnaturally, they are particularly malevolently disposed to persons of my cloth." He produced a box of matches and lit his candle. "But I fancy that we can get decidedly on top of them now."

Mr. Buttery was evidently about to open his campaign. Whether the manner of his announcing this constituted an invitation to participate was obscure, and Appleby appeared to feel that it was rather a tactful withdrawal that was indicated. The proper deportment for spectators during a ceremony of exorcism is not easy to hit upon impromptu, and his decision was perhaps occasioned merely by this. Judith, whose natural bent was for trying anything once, followed him from the hall with some reluctance. "Do you think he's telling the truth?" she presently asked.

"Part of it, at least—or part of it as he believes it to be. Presumably he simply turned his dinghy round and stole away. And now with daylight and the paraphernalia collected in that box he's nerved himself to come back again. Or at least that's the obvious picture. And I can't think he's making up that queer vision. Certainly you didn't seem to think he was."

Judith frowned. "I believe—I don't know why—that all those people were here."

"Did I say you ought to have become a historical novelist? Perhaps you ought to have become a detective. Would you care to be one now?"

"Assisting Scotland Yard?" She glanced at him cautiously, for it was not always easy to tell when John was being serious. "I don't mind having a go."

"Then just keep an eye on our reverend friend while I make



another cast round the place."

Judith was puzzled. "Does the old gentleman really need keeping an eye on?"

"I don't quite know. He may be nothing more than an endearing clerical eccentric, much beloved by all the parish. But I have my doubts."

"Very well. I expect he'll relish a bit of an audience." And Judith slipped back into the hall.

Water Poole would take some time to explore systematically, and Appleby contented himself for the moment with a prow through some of the neighboring rooms. The place was none of his business. He had been decidedly aware of this as Judith had driven him up to it, and he told himself that nothing had happened since to alter this basic fact. Even a policeman should be ready to admit that not everything enigmatical is necessarily nefarious. Even if Mr. Buttery was a poacher, it was not a matter of which an assistant commissioner from Scotland Yard need take any very active notice. Nor ought he to concern himself with investigating an elaborate joke; to do so, indeed, was only to invite annoyance or ridicule. But yet . . .

He had paused in a large and gloomy chamber which had been converted at some period to the uses of a library. There were handsome shelves for many thousands of books, but they now harbored nothing but dust. Dust was thick on them, and thick on the floor. The sight was melancholy—but for Appleby it was finally and definitively informative. He stirred the dust with his toe. It was the first thick dust upon which he had come. One can't, in a hurry, do anything much with an enormous empty library. So it had been left out. It had been left out of the joke. But the hall and one or two rooms around it had been dusted. They had been needed for the fun.

The joke . . . the fun. Appleby prowled on, dissatisfied. There was one very simple and very obvious explanation of Mr. Buttery's vision. Water Poole had been used for a fancy-dress ball. Or better perhaps, for a sort of theatrical party or green room rag. The owner, young Richard Poole, was an actor. It seemed very probable that the old legend connected with his house had prompted him to organize what he conceived to be an appropriate entertainment there for his friends. This was at least a more tenable theory than Mr. Buttery's of a kink in time.

As for goblins—Appleby thought—they don't drop cigarette ash. They don't leave candles on mantelpieces. They don't—he had

moved once more into the open air—presumably leave a lawn something the worse for wear. When Judith had imagined herself to be obscurely sensing presences in the house, she had merely been letting these and other prosaic evidences of the late party filter unnoticed into her imagination. A perfectly commonplace if rather elaborate joke . . .

But goblins disappear at dawn, and nobody sees them go. The cock crows, whereupon they fade and vanish. And something very like this had happened. Any sort of large party creates a good deal of litter; but the litter left by this party was so inconsiderable that a trained eye was required to perceive it. There had been a deliberate care taken to obliterate all traces of whatever proceedings had been going forward. The probability appeared to be that, but for the curious nocturnal habits of the local rector, nobody except the actual participants would have had any knowledge of the affair.

This was queer. It suggested that perhaps Richard Poole bore no responsibility in the matter. It was a joke unobtrusively perpetrated, followed by a careful—and astonishingly rapid—tidy-up. Why? Appleby shook his head as he found himself confronted with this tiresome little, yet perpetually fascinating, keyword of his profession. *Why?* There must be a reason. Probably it was a harmless reason. Perhaps it was a quite stupid and uninteresting reason, and any beguilement an explanation seemed to promise was no more than an effect of the romantic associations of this lonely and moldering house. Still, explanation must be possible. There was a reason if it could be found.

He had strolled down to the river again. It must, after all, be termed something more than a stream—for although narrow, it was quite deep and decidedly navigable. One could bring up a motorboat—say one of those substantially powered houseboat affairs that were so popular on the Thames itself. . . . It struck him that he had seen no boathouse. Yet this was something which Water Poole must surely possess. The absence of anything of the sort intrigued him. He began to poke about.

There was certainly no boathouse on the bank—but the reason, when after some minutes' search he found it, was interesting. An arm of the river—it was in fact a cut, but of evident antiquity and perhaps indeed as old as the mansion itself—passed clean under one wing of the house. Each end was secured by an iron grille which extended perhaps a couple of feet below the level of the water. That by which the cut emerged had quite clearly been undisturbed for generations. But at the entrance the state of affairs

was different. The grille was rusty and bore every appearance of disuse—yet as Appleby peered at it he had his doubts. It was secured by an enormous padlock, plainly manufactured in early Victorian times—and on this too the rust was thick. Appleby however found it of considerable interest, and performed some complicated gymnastic maneuvers in order to get a hand on it. When he rose and walked away he was softly whistling—a melancholy little stave of his own composition. Judith would have marked the sign. His spirits were rising.

And then he found the motor cars. They had not exactly been concealed; they were simply parked on the farther side of an outbuilding which only one rather pertinaciously interested in Water Poole would have been likely to visit. Both were large cars, but one was a good deal more resplendent than the other. Perhaps it would presently be necessary to examine them with some care, but for the moment Appleby contented himself with feeling the radiators. That of the resplendent car was quite cold. The other was warm.

He turned and walked back thoughtfully in the direction of the house. He had almost reached it when he heard the sound of an engine behind him. He glanced back over his shoulder. An open car with a single occupant was approaching. He had just time to distinguish the figure as that of a young man when the car turned off the track and vanished round the outbuildings which Appleby had just left. He heard the engine stop. The suddenly restored silence brought him a curious sense of impending drama. The situation upon which he and Judith had stumbled had so far presented rather a meager cast. It was possible, he thought, that the principal characters were now beginning to drop in.

Perhaps he should go back and welcome this particular accession. He hesitated, and then his eyes fell upon one part of Water Poole which he had not yet explored. It was the totally ruined part, where something like a whole wing had come down. If, as seemed very probable, one of the new arrivals was the owner or some other accredited person, he himself had perhaps only a few minutes left for further investigation before receiving a stiff request to make himself scarce. This persuaded him to press forward, even at the expense of an uncomfortably dusty scramble. In a moment he was climbing over the mountain of rubble with which this part of the forecourt was filled.

As he progressed, he saw that even more of the house than he

supposed had been gashed open when the end pavilion fell. A staircase, intact to the second story and there breaking off in air, had the appearance of a hazardous fire escape; below it was a tumble of stone, brick, and splintered beams. Appleby surveyed this, stopped for a moment, and then quickened his forward scramble. An onlooker would have seen him vanish among the debris—and might have reflected that he remained invisible for rather a long time.

The principal characters were beginning to drop in. The phrase reiterated itself rather grimly in Appleby's mind as he made his way back to the great hall. It was perhaps because he was walking in marked abstraction that, turning a corner of the building, he bumped straight into somebody approaching from the opposite direction. It was a lady. Fortunately she was substantially—indeed powerfully—built, and took the shock well. Appleby steadied her and apologized. "I am extremely sorry. It was careless of me. One doesn't expect much traffic just here."

"Pardon *me*." The lady spoke with an accent that was unmistakably transatlantic. She was alarmed—but this by no means prevented her from being alarming. She was formidable—it might have been ventured almost professionally formidable, as if her everyday business was that of dominating large public meetings. And now she gave Appleby and Appleby's clothes a rapidly appraising glance. "Would you," she asked, "be the owner of this wonderful spot?"

"No, madam. I am not the owner." Appleby's glance was certainly not less searching than the American lady's. "May I ask if you have just arrived here?"

"Just arrived?" It was discernible that the lady regarded this question as needing care. She eyed Appleby for a moment as if she were an accomplished chairman debating how to deal with a troublesome questioner in the body of the hall. "I guess so. Isn't it just the most romantic house you could imagine?"

"It has considerable picturesque appeal, no doubt."

The lady appeared to find this disconcerting. It was as if the body of the hall had produced something really awkward. "Why—I'd say it's just out of this world."

"I fear not."

This was evidently more disconcerting still—the more so as Appleby's tone might fairly have been described as sombre. The lady looked at him in some alarm. "And you say you're not the owner?"

If that isn't too bad."

"Possibly so. My name is Appleby—Sir John Appleby." He looked at the lady steadily. "I am an assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan Police."

The lady gave what in a less massively built person would have been a jump. "Does that mean—"

"It means Scotland Yard." Appleby remarked with interest that at this information the lady turned quite pale. "May I ask your name?"

"Jones." The lady made this announcement with large conviction. "Miss Jones."

"And the name of this house?"

"Say?" The formidable Miss Jones was confused.

"Do you know it, or don't you?"

"Why, it's—" Miss Jones lamentably hesitated. "Of course I don't."

"Then, madam, why and how did you come here?" And Appleby paused. "Perhaps you simply saw the house from the highroad and decided to turn aside and have a look?"

"Just that." Miss Jones, as if thus reminded that her business was with the visual scene, tilted her head and gave Water Poole a glance of unrestrained if somewhat hurried approval. "If it isn't a sweet spot. Would it belong to a lord?" She transferred her gaze briskly to a wristwatch and gave an exclamation of dismay. She might once more have been the busy committeewoman with a fresh engagement pressing. "But I must be getting along."

"I am afraid not. It is unfortunately essential that you should remain. You will be kind enough to accompany me into the house and answer certain further questions."

"Accompany a strange man into a lonely and deserted house!" Miss Jones's tone spoke of the largest moral outrage. "I shall do nothing—"

"Here is my authority." Appleby fished in a pocket, produced what was in fact a driving license, and with shameless resource held it momentarily before Miss Jones's startled gaze. "This way, madam, if you please."

"I call this outrageous." Miss Jones delivered herself of her protest with energy. But she walked, nevertheless, in the direction which Appleby politely indicated.

Mr. Buttery had either concluded or broken off his contest with the goblins. He and Judith were standing on one side of the fireplace, as if they had formed for the moment a defensive alliance.

On the other side was the young man whom Appleby had lately seen driving up to the house; it was apparent that he had been in the hall for only a couple of minutes, and that the entrance of Appleby and Miss Jones was a complicating factor in a situation of which he was trying to take the measure. It was to Appleby that he addressed himself now. "Really, sir, I don't get the hang of this at all. Mr. Buttery I'm more or less prepared to see—although I can't make head or tail of his talk at the moment. I have gathered before that he has rather a fondness for the place. But why you and these ladies—"

"We owe you a great many apologies." Appleby was entirely bland. "May I take it that you are Mr. Poole, and that my wife has made herself known to you? And may I now introduce you to Miss Jones, a lady who has performed the astonishing feat of noticing Water Poole from the highroad? We are all quite frankly trespassers, and of course we must take ourselves off. I have no doubt that you find our intrusion most vexatious."

"I don't know that I want to say that." Richard Poole was willing to be mollified. "Of course one doesn't very much welcome trippers. But it would be churlish to cut up rough at the appearance of people with an informed interest in the place. Particularly—" and he glanced sharply at Miss Jones "—if they are American visitors."

"Miss Jones is certainly from the United States. She isn't, by the way, already known to you?"

"Known to me?" The owner of Water Poole was startled. "Certainly not."

"And you, madam?" Appleby turned and looked attentively at Miss Jones. "Do you know Mr. Poole here by sight—or perhaps by name?"

There was a moment's silence while Miss Jones subjected this question to her customary wary analysis. "I'm quite sure I never got acquainted with Mr. Poole before. I don't know many folks in this country."

"That gets something clear." Appleby indicated Mr. Buttery. "And you don't know this gentleman either?"

"One moment." Richard Poole had stepped forward—slightly impatient, slightly perplexed. "Is there really a question of getting things clear? I am, after all, the owner of this place, and I'm not aware of anything of the sort."

"I have no desire, I assure you, to express any impertinent curiosity." Appleby's mildness continued to be notable. "But it is true, you know, that Mr. Buttery has had a most perplexing experience

here."

"To be sure he has." Poole's tone was politely amused. "Goblins and fairies at midnight—and as a consequence of his encounter with them he has been trying out some sort of exorcism. It isn't one of my own interests, I'm afraid. But I don't in the least object to his going right ahead."

"You just can't have been listening, Mr. Poole, if you propose to treat this matter in that offhand fashion." Judith now took a hand in the conversation. "What Mr. Buttery saw was a whole ball—call it the Naseby Ball."

"Then I think he was uncommonly lucky." Poole glanced whimsically at the venerable clergyman, clearly determined not to budge from his airy attitude. "It's a spectacle that seems commonly to be reserved for the very old. And also, I must add, for the simplest classes of society. Gaffer Odgers of Poole Parva is the last ancient I heard of as having been favored in that way."

"You have never witnessed this legendary manifestation yourself?" Appleby had strolled to a window and now turned to study the young man in a full light.

"Of course not."

"Nor taken any part in—well, occasioning it?"

"No. I'm not a medium, or anything of that sort!"

"You have never come and kept watch, even, at the appropriate season?"

"Good lord, no." Poole was again determinedly amused. "I tell you I don't take any interest in spooks."

"Nor very much in Water Poole?" Appleby paused. "May I ask when you were here last?"

The young man hesitated. "Can that really be any business of yours? But the answer, if it interests you, is about eighteen months ago."

"Why are you here today?"

This time Poole flushed. "Dash it all, sir, this is a bit too much."

"On the contrary, it's not nearly enough." Quite suddenly Appleby was no less grim than he had been with Miss Jones a little earlier. "Mr. Buttery is an educated man in a responsible position. He gives a most circumstantial account of very odd goings-on here last night. And this morning you, sir, turn up for the first time in eighteen months. Do you ask me to believe that this is purely coincidental?"

"I don't ask you to believe anything. I simply tell you to clear—" Richard Poole's glance fell on Judith and he checked himself. "I



must ask you to be good enough to withdraw from my house and land at once."

"Possibly our introductions haven't gone far enough." Appleby produced a pocketbook. "May I give you my card?"

There was a moment's silence while Poole took the slip of paste-board and glanced at it. His flush died away and his manner became uncertain. "I don't know what to say about this. I must have a minute to think."

"By all means. And I feel bound to emphasize, Mr. Poole, that—however it may be with *your* arrival here—mine is a matter of pure chance."

"I don't think I want to say anything."

"As you please. But I think you have a story to tell, and that you had better tell it." Appleby paused and looked at the young man gravely. "There is one circumstance, of which you may or may not be aware, which makes this queer business upon which my wife and I have stumbled extremely serious."

Poole frowned. "You speak in riddles, so far as I'm concerned. I don't know what you're talking about."

"That may be so. At present, I don't intend to divulge the circumstance to which I refer. But I solemnly assure you that it is something which makes all concealment on your part dangerous and in all probability impossible."

The young man was impressed. "I still don't know that I ought to say anything—without a solicitor and so forth. It occurs to me that I have been breaking the law. I hadn't thought of it that way—and indeed the idea's fantastic. Still, I may have been trying to get money by false pretenses." He looked at Appleby with a sudden odd naivete. "It's devilish awkward."

"It does sound as if it might be a shade uncomfortable." Appleby was mildly sardonic. "But I still advise you to speak out, Mr. Poole."

"Very well. I will. You won't believe a word of my story, I expect. But you shall have it." Richard Poole glanced about him. "I don't mind your wife—or, for that matter, Mr. Buttery. But I really don't see this Miss—er—Jones—"

"Sure." Miss Jones took this broad hint with alacrity. "Mr. Poole's affairs are no business of mine. If you'll pardon me, I'll be getting along."

Appleby shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't allow you to do that." He turned to Poole. "Do you think Miss Jones has simply strayed in on the party? There isn't likely to be any place for her in your story?"

Poole stared. "I can't think—" He stopped. "Unless—"

"Perhaps we had better take things in order." Appleby glanced around the empty hall. "It's a pity there's nothing to sit down on except Mr. Buttery's box."

"Dear me! I have been most remiss." Mr. Buttery pushed forward the box, and then found himself in some embarrassment as to which lady should have the offer of it.

"You'd better sit on it yourself." Miss Jones eyed the clergyman searchingly. "How old are you?"

"How old, madam?" Mr. Buttery was so surprised by this outrageous question that he did in fact sit down, without more ado. "Sixty-eight."

"You look ten years older. I suppose you drink. A palefaced drinker, too. Do you know about your expectation of life? Remind me to let you have some statistics." Miss Jones paused in this astonishing homily. "It ought to be more generally known—"

"That's it." Richard Poole was regarding the lady with a sort of horrified recognition. "She has a place in my story after all."

Appleby nodded. "I hardly supposed otherwise. But please begin."

"It's going to sound very queer." Richard Poole put his hands in his trouser pockets and paced nervously across the hall. "Perhaps you know that I'm an actor by profession? In other words, my regular concern is with illusion—with creating and sustaining one or another pleasurable illusion. And that is what, together with a group of friends, I set myself to do here last night. My motive was entirely benevolent and disinterested."

Miss Jones gave a sardonic laugh. "What you call a charity matinee with an all-star cast?"

"We were none of us stars and it wasn't a matinee. The curtain had to go up at night—and any old night wouldn't do. It had to be a *dark* night. If too much had appeared—if the illusion had failed, you see—well, it would have been just too bad. As it was, only a very remarkable combination of circumstances made it possible."

Appleby nodded. "Do I understand you to believe, Mr. Poole, that this benevolent illusion did in fact pass off successfully?"

"I certainly supposed so. The only snag was its turning out that I might be suspected of having a motive that I'd never thought of. Quite suddenly, and out of the blue, I was presented with a totally unexpected moral issue. I failed to cope with it. It's before me still."

"I wonder." Miss Jones, although she had the appearance of one who feels it desirable to keep her own counsel, allowed herself this

enigmatical interjection with some emphasis. "But go on."

"If you'll keep quiet, madam, that's just what I mean to do. . . . I suppose we all have American cousins. I suppose even *you* are somebody's cousin. And *my* cousin turned out to be Hiram Poole. It's queer to think of a Poole being called Hiram—but there he was, complete with family tree. The genealogy was all quite accurate, and he actually had the thing hung up in his suite at Murray's. Hiram is a very modest man. In fact he is quite pathologically shy and unassuming—which is an essential factor in my story. But he is excessively rich, and it wouldn't occur to him not to put up in the best hotel in town. I found him there when I responded to his letter. I can't say that I was summoned, since what he sent me might have best been described as a mere diffident hint of his existence.

"It is essential that you should appreciate my lively feeling from the first that Hiram is an agreeable figure of considerable pathos. His money is of his own making, I gather, and has come from the manufacture of some nameless but certainly humble object of domestic utility. Might it be washtubs? Perhaps they are out of date. I just don't know.

"It turned out that he had never been in Europe before, although making the trip had been a life's dream with him. He had nerved himself to it now only because it was his last chance. Hiram is a dying man. He told me in a fashion that was entirely matter of fact that his doctors had given him only a few months to live. Well, that has increased the effect of pathos, I need hardly say. But it isn't what has made poor old Hiram so attractive to me. He is thoroughly romantic, and this trip has been for him a purely romantic pilgrimage. That, to me, is appealing in itself. But he combines with it an elusive and wholly engaging sense of humor. Deep down in him there's gaiety. I think that's it."

"Isn't that a quality your family prides itself in?" Appleby had remembered Mr. Buttery's description of the Pooles. "That and resourcefulness?"

"Hiram would like that comment—because the great point about him is his family piety. It isn't of course snobbish. Having identifiable ancestors in the thirteenth century would never occur to him as an occasion for giving himself airs. With him it's rather something for a large wonder. And I soon saw that he had been hoping for some deep draught of it before he said goodbye.

"In the last few weeks, Hiram and I have done a good many showplaces together. Have you ever been to the Tower of London?"

It's perfectly horrible—the dungeon and torture chamber of England—but Hiram loved it. He told me about Pooles of whom I'd never heard who had come to a violent end there. We had an ecstatic day at Hampton Court. All that sort of thing. And now you must see clearly enough where all this is leading to."

"To Water Poole." It was Judith who replied. "You offered to get up a sort of historical pageant for him."

"It was more than that. He has, as you can guess, a very strong feeling for Water Poole. But he hadn't ventured down here. He hadn't, I mean, made as much as a private trip to peep at the place. The notion of peeping would somehow offend his sense of delicacy. He was waiting for something. It was quite a while before I realized what it was.

"I did know that he had brought over from America with him a big county history published early in the present century, and the part dealing with Water Poole he had grangerized—I believe that's the word—with all sorts of additional cuttings and engravings. But his information wasn't very up to date—as presently appeared.

"I had asked him to lunch at my flat—I live just off Piccadilly—to meet one or two people who I thought would please him. It was a reasonable success, and he lingered with me after the others had gone. He had quite a lot to say in praise of the few old things I possess and keep lying about there; but nevertheless there was some undercurrent of disappointment that I didn't at first catch hold of. But in the end Hiram brought out a remark that was entirely revealing. 'This is certainly a pleasant apartment, Richard,' he said. 'But, all the same, you must find it wonderful when you can get away from London to Water Poole.'

"As you can see, there would have been only one reply to make. But for a moment I hesitated—it seemed so wicked to disillusion the old chap—and after that I was lost."

There was a moment's silence, broken by Judith. "And then you set about the business of what you call creating and sustaining a pleasurable illusion? You allowed it to be supposed that Water Poole is a going concern?"

"Just that. I won't tell you how, in half an hour's talk, I was hopelessly edged into it. Such a lamentable piece of weakness doesn't make comfortable remembering. The crucial point was that I found Hiram to set tremendous store by the notion that I lived here. He called it keeping the flag flying, sticking to your guns,

and that sort of thing. You see, he may have spent his life giving better and brighter washtubs to a great democracy, but at heart Hiram is an aristocrat. What made my position the more uncomfortable was the fact that there is nothing second-rate or silly about Hiram's ideas. He would take no pleasure, for instance, in the contemplation of grand relations simply leading a fashionable life. But he liked his picture of the head of the family with his back to the ancestral wall, and holding out against the degeneracy of the modern world.

"Well, here I was, in a false position, and there was only one factor which might possibly save me from disgrace. Hiram's English visit was drawing to an end. And he was so shy—so reluctant to move in any sort of strange society—that he was quite unlikely to hear anything of the true situation here at Water Poole unless I told him myself. But of course there was a snag." Richard Poole paused, and then appealed to Appleby. "You can see what it was?"

"It was hardly decent not to invite him here."

"Exactly. When Hiram took his leave of me after that luncheon party it was impossible for me not to say something to that effect. To avoid it would have been utterly indecent. Of course I can see now things that I could have said. I might have declared that some theatrical tour was carrying me off to Brazil next morning. But no ingenuity of that sort came into my head. I did the only conceivably proper thing, and said that I hoped within the next few days to have some suggestion for his coming down to the old place. I could see that he was overjoyed. And as he went away he did, in his diffident fashion, say something quite positive. He would rather his visit didn't take the form of an active social engagement. His health was as I knew it to be, and his remaining vitality was sufficient for spectatorship rather than intercourse. That gave me my idea."

"Was it quite a new venture?" Appleby asked the question curiously. "Or are you in the habit of organizing elaborate hoaxes?"

"I've never done anything of the sort before—and as a matter of fact it took some time to come to me. At first my only notion was of some procedure amounting to a confession with the addition of anything I could think of to soften the blow. I'd have Hiram down, show him the place as it is, and say how much I hoped to get it back one day. What prevented me from doing this was a scruple."

"I'd call it the honest course to have pursued."

"It would have been a sort of begging." Richard Poole spoke with

sudden heat. "Don't you see? Hiram is a tremendously wealthy man. Showing him Water Poole in its decay would simply be asking him to put his hand in his pocket. I found I couldn't do it."

"I don't believe him!" Once more the force of her emotions constrained Miss Jones to intervene. "And I shan't believe another word he says. It is perfectly obvious that Mr. Poole contrived some disgraceful mercenary plot against his relative—his distant relative—and that now he is perverting the whole matter."

"Didn't I say I'd meet with incredulity?" The owner of Water Poole appealed this time to Judith. "But that is the simple fact. I had reached a position at which it became a point of honor to exhibit this house as a going concern, standing in no need of the washtub millions. I had a good idea, by the way, to what purposes Hiram was proposing that those millions should in fact be devoted, for he had spoken to me, very briefly, of his philanthropic interests and—as he called them—testamentary dispositions. But that's by the way. Here I was, thinking up some means of pleasing Hiram and getting myself out of a ridiculous scrape.

"Nothing at first came to me, and I let the matter rest for longer than I intended. Then I got a note from Hiram, telling me when he was due to sail for New York. He said nothing about Water Poole, of course, but in the circumstances this intimation of his departure could not be other than an implicit reproach. I was rather desperate. And then I noticed the date on which he was sailing.

"It was, as a matter of fact, today's date—and at that I had my inspiration. I became a demon—perhaps Mr. Buttery would say a goblin—of energy, and by that same evening I had got together a sort of committee of my closest friends. What had come to me was that, just at this time of year, we could manage a sort of lightning revivification of Water Poole without raising any awkward curiosity in the neighborhood. Anything observed, and anything talked about, would be put down at once to the lingering superstition that attaches to the place.

"Hiram, needless to say, knew the story of the first Naseby Ball, and I was sure that the notion of some species of commemoration would appeal to him. But I had an additional reason for making my party a costume affair. It was a matter of what you might call the psychology of successful illusion.

"My friends and myself were going to create the appearance of a houseparty here at Water Poole, in such a way that Hiram could be asked to drop in on it and get the impression of that going concern. But in reality we should be actors putting on a show in

a decayed theater with crumbling scenery and unreliable props. For example, the whole business of lighting was going to be uncommonly tricky—probably there would have to be nothing but candles—and the project only looked remotely feasible because of that crucial fact of Hiram's temperament: his diffidence, and his unwillingness to treat himself to more than one entranced glimpse of the ancestral home. Even so, the project was technically daunting, and I soon saw that our only chance was this: *that our illusion should be of an illusion*. If we were all confessedly engaged in creating a fiction, then the basic fiction—or the action within the fiction, so to speak—might be something we could get away with.”

“Your plan was undoubtedly a very clever one.” Appleby glanced at Richard Poole with what might have been reluctant admiration. “Did it occur to you that if your cousin detected the fraud it would be very much more painful for him than a frank statement of the truth?”

“It certainly did—which is why I determined not to fail. And I don't think I *did* fail.” Poole turned a thoughtful eye on Miss Jones. “At least, that's what I've been imagining.”

“It all went like clockwork?”

“Yes. We moved in with several vans just after dark. The decor had been planned in minute detail beforehand, and there wasn't a hitch. When my cousin Hiram arrived, driving his own car, I was on the lookout for him, and got him straight round to the presentable side of the house. It was clear almost at once—an actor has a sense of these things—that we were successfully putting our show across. Mr. Poole of Water Poole was giving one of his accustomed houseparties, and his guests, with others invited in for the evening, were indulging in a historically appropriate costume ball. My only fear was that Hiram, in his unassuming way, would ask if he might quietly make a tour of the whole house. He knows its history well; and there must be various rooms—some of them perhaps now in ruins—with associations of great interest to him. But of course Hiram would never have dreamed of giving even that amount of trouble. He stayed just over an hour, moving about quietly with me among the guests, accepting a few introductions, drinking a glass of champagne, and so on. And then he took his leave. The whole thing, which had been so terrifying in the prospect, proved astoundingly easy. Long before dawn—the early June dawn—we had folded our tents like the Arabs and silently stolen away.”

“But that wasn't, in fact, all?” A sombre expression had returned



to Appleby's face. "And it would have been better if it had been?"

"Precisely." Poole hesitated. "When Hiram left me it was plain that he was very much moved. Our imposture had been only too effective. It had been one of the deepest experiences of his life."

"That must have been rather uncomfortable for you."

"It was. He apologized for not stopping longer. He confessed that it had been a strain, and that he didn't think he had better take any more. And then he brought out the astounding thing. 'Richard,' he said, 'there's something I must tell you—in strict confidence.'

"We were standing beside his car. I felt instantly uneasy—partly because of an odd feeling that we were being overheard, and partly from sheer foreboding. I muttered something about respecting any confidence he cared to make.

"'I've made a mistake,' he said. 'To leave money out of the family—a family like *our* family—is utterly wrong. This night has been a revelation to me. You stand by the old ways, Richard—and I know enough about the economic difficulties of this country to know that it must be against tremendous odds.' I could see his glance going back to the dark bulk of the house. 'It's magnificent, Richard. I can't tell you. I can't begin to speak. But you shall be my sole heir. God bless you. And goodbye.' And with that Hiram climbed into his car and drove away. And now you have the whole story. Of course he will have to be told. I see that now. I've been a frightful ass, and I'm back pretty well where I started."

There was a long silence. Richard Poole produced a silk handkerchief and mopped his forehead. Mr. Buttery, as if he were some aged anthropoid of an imitative bent, promptly did the same. Appleby took a turn round the hall, and on coming back addressed its owner quickly. "And where do you suppose Hiram Poole to be now?"

"On board the *Queen Mary*, steaming for New York. He was to drive straight to London, change, and catch the boat train."

"He was to change? Did he come here in fancy dress?"

"Yes. He had realized that it was the unnoticeable thing to do."

"A black Caroline costume with a gold embroidered cloak?"

"Yes." Richard Poole's eyes widened. "But I don't see—"

"Your cousin is greyhaired, with a small scar on his chin?"

"Yes."

"Then I am very sorry to say that he is not on board the *Queen Mary*. His dead body is lying at the bottom of the ruined staircase in this house."

\* \* \*

Miss Jones had fainted, been resuscitated, and at last accommodated on Mr. Buttery's box. Judith had driven off rapidly in her car, Richard Poole had identified his cousin's body and was now back in the hall, looking pale and troubled. "It's unbelievable," he said.

"That is what you felt your tale was going to be." Appleby spoke very seriously. "Hiram Poole has died, so to speak, at the end of a decidedly tall story put up by yourself. There are various possibilities. Some of them can't be explored until we have a medical report. Others suggest themselves at once."

"Such as?" The young man looked at him dully.

"You no doubt see for yourself that it would be easy to set your proceedings in a very damaging light. You are a poor man. You have admitted what it would be impossible long to conceal: that you brought this rich American cousin down to Water Poole and submitted him to a gross imposture. Your own story is that he was prompted by this fraud to declare his intention of making you his heir. It may very well be so. But one can conceive of other turns that the affair may have taken. It might be suggested that you were aware that you had already been constituted, at least in some degree, your cousin's heir. It might be suggested that last night he penetrated to the nature of the charade in which you had involved him."

"Stop!" Richard Poole's face was bloodless. "You have no right to confront me with these situations. It is utterly irregular."

"My dear sir, I have no official standing in this matter at all. I am speaking to you as a private citizen; and at the same time I am giving you, for your own benefit, an experienced view of certain lines of speculation which the officers who will investigate this business may be prompted to follow."

"I see. Very well. Go on."

"It is conceivable that Hiram Poole drove away more or less as you have claimed—but that he had his doubts. Suspicion grew on him; eventually he turned his car and came back to Water Poole; and what he found in the dawn was a derelict house, and his hopeful young heir pottering round clearing up a bit of litter. He wasn't very pleased, and there may even have been a quarrel. So much for one hypothesis. We needn't follow it further at the moment."

"It sounds damnably convincing." Richard Poole managed rather a harsh laugh.

"It has, as it happens, one weakness. It leaves something out. I think you claim to know certain particulars of Hiram's existing

testamentary dispositions? He had been proposing to leave his fortune to philanthropic organizations?"

"Yes—and to one such organization in particular. The bulk of his estate was to go to a body advocating temperance reform. I remember thinking it odd in him. It didn't really cohere with the kind of feelings and attitudes that Hiram revealed when he was over here. But there it was. Prohibition all over again: it was something like that, I gathered, that his money was to go to the support of."

"Capital!"

Appleby turned in astonishment, to see Mr. Buttery emphatically nodding his venerable head. "You approve of such an endeavor?"

"Certainly." Mr. Buttery was quite excited. "I declare Mr. Poole's cousin to have been most enlightened. The attempt to prohibit by law all use of alcoholic beverages is one which interests me very much. I think I can say that I approve of it. I regret that it has never made more headway on this side of the Atlantic."

"Sir, let me say that you do honor to your calling." Miss Jones had risen from the box, advanced upon the clergyman, and was now shaking him vigorously by the hand. She turned to Appleby and Richard Poole. "Thousands will take fresh heart when they hear of the noble declaration of this truly reverend old man!"

"Thank you, madam, thank you." Mr. Buttery—perhaps recalling that he had been termed a palefaced drinker—appeared a little embarrassed by this unexpected effusion.

And Appleby was looking at him in surprise. "What about that burgundy and madeira? Would you propose, sir, that in framing their legislation our prohibitionists should insert a clause exempting the clergy?" He turned to Miss Jones. "I'm not quite certain that you and Mr. Buttery are going to be at one in this matter, after all. But, for the moment, we have another sort of concern with it. May I take it, madam, that it would not be incorrect to assert that the urging of temperance reform constitutes your profession? Mr. Poole, I think, has already had an inkling of it."

"It has certainly been hovering in my head for some time." Poole swung round to survey the American lady, and as he did so he produced a strained smile. "The rival charity—that's what you are!"

Appleby nodded. "Exactly. Water Poole or water wagon—it might be expressed like that. Which was cousin Hiram's fortune going to the support of? . . . And now perhaps Miss Jones will speak."

"I am *not* Miss Jones." The American lady had advanced to the middle of the hall, and her announcement was made with a very sufficient sense of drama. "Let there be no more subterfuge. I am not Miss Jones, I am Miss Brown."

"Not, surely—" Richard Poole, despite his awkward situation, was prompted to a freak of humor—"not, surely *the* Miss Brown?"

"I guess so." Miss Brown's was a wholly modest acknowledgment. "I am Louisa Brown, Vice-President of the Daughters of Abstinence."

"It sounds like William Blake." Poole might have been slightly dazed. "Are they something in America?"

"Certainly. They constitute one of our leading temperance bodies, and the one to which the late Hiram Poole has bequeathed almost his entire fortune. And I have been acting as a Guardian."

"Why should Hiram require a Guardian? I never heard such nonsense."

"It's a precaution we are accustomed to take with potential major benefactors. Particularly when they go overseas." Miss Brown spoke with confidence. "Temptations are manifold. Haven't we just heard that Mr. Hiram Poole was seduced, in this very house, into drinking a glass of champagne? Disgusting! Revolting!"

This view of the hospitality of Water Poole appeared to strike the owner of the mansion as decidedly offensive. "As a self-appointed bodyguard, madam, you have been thoroughly inefficient. Hiram is dead, and when you get back to your own country I sincerely trust that all the other Daughters will give you a thoroughly bad time."

"You haven't got the picture quite right." Appleby intervened dryly. "It wasn't Miss Brown's business to keep your cousin alive. Her guardianship consisted in ensuring that, if he died, it wasn't with the wrong sort of last will and testament immediately behind him. It is a consideration in which there is food for thought. But we still haven't had Miss Brown's story. Will you please proceed?"

"I certainly will." Miss Brown put her hands behind her back and eyed the three men before her as if they had been a large assembly of recalcitrant brewers or vintners. "It was well known to me that Mr. Hiram Poole had these unwholesome interests in family history and a feudal past. So when upon his arrival in England he made the acquaintance of Mr. Poole—*this* Mr. Poole—I realized that the utmost vigilance would be required of me. As a matter of routine, I got to know all about Water Poole. I got to know all about Mr. Richard Poole's feelings for it—or lack of feel-

ings for it."

Richard Poole exploded. "The woman's crazy!"

"For instance, I have in my file—it struck me as worth paying for—a letter from Mr. Richard offering to sell this house for the purpose of what is called an approved school. He also had a project for turning the place over to a syndicate to run as a scientific pig farm."

"Crazy?" Appleby looked rather grimly at the owner of Water Poole. "I'd be inclined to say myself that there's method in her madness."

"Madness in her method, if you ask me," Poole was gloomy. "But go on, madam—go on."

"Murray's is an excellent hotel, and the servants don't gossip. But it was a different matter with the firm from whom Mr. Hiram hired a car, and I was soon in a position to know most of his movements a day or so in advance. That's how it came about that, when he set out for Water Poole in his fancy dress last night, I was on the road in my own car a hundred yards behind."

Appleby was looking at Miss Brown in admiration. "That was very efficient, I'm bound to say. And just what did you know about what was going forward?"

"I knew that Mr. Richard had been dashing around the firms that provide stage furniture, and that he had been holding long meetings with large numbers of his theatrical friends. I think I may say that I had the greatest part of the picture already in my head. When we got down here, of course, I let Mr. Hiram get a good lead, and then I parked my own car and explored the ground. I guess I hadn't got hold of the fancy-dress aspect of the affair, and the significance of that puzzled me a good deal. But the rest was clear enough. I saw that the moment to expose Mr. Richard Poole had arrived."

"You were probably right," Appleby contributed this soberly. "And how did you propose to set about it?"

"I thought at first of simply walking in upon the feast and denouncing it—denouncing the imposture and denouncing the champagne. Then it occurred to me that I might, as a consequence, put myself in considerable personal danger. I might be thrown in the river and drowned, and the Daughters of Abstinence would never so much as know what had become of me."

"Bless me!" Richard Poole stared. "The woman might believe herself to be on the banks of the Niger, not of the—"

"Mr. Richard and his friends were flown with wine," Miss Brown

interrupted brusquely. "The expression is that of the great English poet Milton, justly celebrated for confining himself at the supper table to a few olives and a glass of water. Any insolence, any outrage might be expected of them. I therefore skulked."

"I bet you did." Richard Poole breathed heavily:

"I was almost at Mr. Richard's elbow when Mr. Hiram made the shameful speech."

"The shameful speech?" For a moment Appleby was at sea.

"About making this dishonest and intemperate young man his heir. Then Mr. Hiram drove off, and I hurried to my own car and followed. But he had a good lead and was driving very fast. It was many miles before I overtook him and signaled him to stop. He took no notice. I therefore passed him and edged him almost into the ditch. One sees it done in the movies. He stopped, but I found it very hard to open communication with him. I have an idea that he took me for a person of disreputable character."

"You must remember it was in the dark." Richard Poole produced this with obscure but massive irony. "And then?"

"It took what must have been hours—but at length I did contrive to explain to him the imposture to which he had been subjected. He refused to believe it. Finally I persuaded him to drive back to Water Poole. When we arrived, the place was already in darkness. I got out a torch and led him on a tour of inspection. It was then that he began to behave very queerly."

"What do you mean?" Poole's voice held real anxiety. "Was he very angry—or upset?"

"He wouldn't speak. We went over almost the whole place with the aid of a torch he had brought from his car. And he wouldn't speak a word to me. I thought it most discourteous. There was one particularly striking instance. We had glanced into a small pantry—one from which a staircase runs down to some of the cellars—and it simply reeked of spirits. No doubt it was your disgusting champagne and so on. I drew Mr. Hiram's attention to it as evidence of the depraved society into which his acquaintance with you had brought him. He simply stared at me without uttering a syllable. And then, when we had emerged again into the open air, we parted."

"Parted?" Appleby was surprised. "In what circumstances?"

Miss Brown hesitated. "He told me to go away."

Richard Poole laughed again—less harshly this time. "Hiram, you know, had very good taste. When he did speak, he said the sensible thing. He asked you to clear out. And you did?"

"I did." Miss Brown flushed. "I considered that my good offices had been scorned, and that I had been personally insulted. I got into my car and drove away."

"Leaving Hiram alone at Water Poole?"

"I guess so. Unless you were still here yourself, Mr. Poole."

Appleby looked up sharply. "Have you any reason, Miss Brown, to suppose anything of the sort?"

Miss Brown hesitated. "I can't swear to Mr. Poole here. But I did have a hunch that there was somebody lurking around."

"I see. Now, when you left Water Poole, however much you may have felt personally insulted, you must have supposed your work there to be done. Mr. Richard Poole was wholly discredited. May I ask you why, in these circumstances, you returned here this morning?"

"Because I was uneasy. Mr. Hiram Poole was an old man, whom I knew to be in poor health. And I had left him here in the small hours, after subjecting him to painful disillusion. I returned in order to make quite sure that nothing had happened to him."

"Well—it had." Appleby uttered this shortly and then took one of his brief walks to a window. "In the ruined part of this house there is a staircase that mounts through two stories and then goes on to end nowhere. From that hazardous eminence, sometime in the small hours, Mr. Hiram Poole was precipitated. And there are still a good many possibilities. For example, we don't know—at least *I* don't know—what was in the dead man's mind. How did he take the revelation which it is agreed was made to him? Miss Brown, the only person to be in his company after the truth was revealed, quite failed to get any change out of him. That, at least, is her story. Suppose it to be true . . . Do you hear a car? It will be my wife with a doctor."

"I am not in the habit of prevarication."

"Very well. Your story is gospel, so far as it goes. But there may have been—indeed, if it *is* gospel, there must have been—a further and distinct act in the drama. Mr. Richard Poole *may* have been lurking around—or he may have returned after you left, encountered his cousin, and become involved in some altercation with fatal consequences. In the circumstances it is a possible picture." Appleby paused. "I mentioned the chance of Mr. Richard's being *already*, in some degree, Hiram Poole's heir—and knowing it. On that, the actual truth must, of course, eventually become available. For what my own opinion is worth, it is slightly improbable. But one fact is admitted. As matters stood last night, and still stand



now, the Daughters of Abstinence are very large beneficiaries under Hiram Poole's will. And this brings us back to Miss Brown. Her story may *not* be gospel. It may be quite untrue."

"I am not in the—"

"No doubt, madam. But there are tight corners in which the most inflexibly truthful persons find themselves a little inclined to stretch a point. Suppose that this investigation of the true state of Water Poole brought both Hiram Poole and yourself to the top of that staircase. He had been silent. You became vehement in your denunciation of Mr. Richard. And then Hiram Poole did something which surprised you very much, but which in fact was thoroughly consonant with human nature. He cried a plague on both your houses."

"He did what?" Miss Brown was both startled and at a loss.

"He declared that Richard should not have a penny of his. And then he said precisely the same thing about the Daughters of Abstinence."

"He would never do such a thing."

"I repeat that I think it extremely likely that he would. Your organization had set a spy on him, and subjected him to an acute humiliation of which you, madam, cannot have the faintest imaginative understanding. So here is another sober possibility. Up there, at the top of that crazy staircase, this old man told you that your organization would be struck out of his will tomorrow."

Miss Brown was silent—and suddenly old and spectral. Richard Poole looked at her not unkindly and then turned to Appleby. "I must say you have considerable skill in making it uncomfortable for everybody in turn. Is there more to come? What about Mr. Buttery?"

And Appleby nodded. "I'm coming to Mr. Buttery now."

"To me?" Over his steel-rimmed spectacles the clergyman looked at Appleby in naive alarm. "I fear all this has been incomprehensible to me, and that I am unlikely to be able to assist. Here and there—on the goblin side of the thing—I am fairly clear. But all this of wills eludes me. Mr. Poole, it seems, has told one story; this lady who keeps on changing her name has told another; and I suppose you, sir, must choose between them."

Appleby shook his head. "That may be unnecessary. I have myself ventured some alternative hypotheses which are no doubt mutually exclusive. But the stories of Mr. Poole and Miss Brown do not in themselves contradict each other. Both may have told as much of the truth as they know. It is up to you to tell the rest."

Mr. Buttery considered this injunction for a moment in silence. Then, disconcertingly, his venerable features assumed an expression of the deepest cunning. "I suppose," he asked, "that what is called motive is of great importance in a matter of this sort?"

"Undoubtedly."

"You were asking, for instance, *why* this lady returned to Water Poole when she did. Stress is put upon things like that?"

"Certainly it is."

"Awkward. Troublesome. Vexatious." And Mr. Buttery shook his head. "If I myself had what might be termed a *respectable* motive—"

"Folklore." Appleby was brisk. "Your own further investigations of Water Poole last night, sir, were prompted entirely by your interest in folklore. You were after the goblins, and nothing but the goblins. And now perhaps you can go ahead."

"I don't quite follow this." Richard Poole was curious. "Am I to understand that Mr. Buttery—"

"Mr. Buttery is a great lawbreaker." Appleby announced this without any appearance of censure. "A little quiet poaching warms the cockles of his heart. But lately he has taken larger flight. He found, I think, a very tempting cellar, to be entered unobtrusively by a cut from the river. Anyway, he has been having great fun distilling illicit spirits. Hence the smell remarked by Miss Brown. And hence Mr. Buttery's own enthusiasm for Total Prohibition. He feels that if that came in he might go into business in a large way. But these are irrelevant matters."

"Really irrelevant?" Mr. Buttery was sharply hopeful.

"At least there is a very good chance of it. Last night, sir, you watched the goblins in some alarm until they packed up. And then you came to investigate. They are said, after all, to do terrible things in dairies. Perhaps they might have been behaving equally mischievously in your distillery."

"I certainly waited in my dinghy until all was dark and silent again." Mr. Buttery now spoke with much placidity. "It was a tedious vigil. I was not however greatly surprised. For goblins, as you know, have a great reputation for keeping it up till dawn. Gradually their lights went out, and I was conscious of intermittent rumblings. Parties of them were returning to the nether world."

"Or our vans were driving away," Richard Poole was looking at the clergyman in some perplexity, as if finding it hard to gauge just how deep his eccentricity went.

"When at length I ventured to land they had all vanished—as our national poet puts it, following darkness like a dream. Or all,

that is, except the Goblin King."

"The Goblin King?" Miss Brown, whose spirits appeared to be a little revived, interrupted. "Do goblins have that?"

"Certainly—and he is rather a fine personage. It is a mistake, you know, to suppose that goblins are dwarfs, or in any sense little people. I was not at all surprised to find that the Goblin King was a most distinguished figure, magnificently attired in black and gold."

"Cousin Hiram!"

"With him he had an obscure familiar. I caught only glimpses, you know. As I remarked earlier, it is very dangerous for clergy to get involved with goblins. So the utmost circumspection was necessary. The Goblin King had some species of lantern. I had to be very careful to keep out of its beam; and it was only from the oblique light coming from it that I could distinguish him at all. The familiar puzzled me. Could it have been Hecate? I am more inclined to suppose a minor Teutonic divinity. Possibly the Sow Goddess." Mr. Buttery looked ingenuously at Miss Brown. "Would that appear to you to be a tenable hypothesis?"

"I think you are a very wicked old man." Miss Brown's response, if not strictly relevant, was spirited.

"Presently however, the familiar was banished. This was the only occasion upon which I actually heard the Goblin King speak. "Go away," he said. I was much struck by his tone of authority. Without more ado, the Sow Goddess—I am sure she was that—took her departure."

Richard Poole looked wickedly at Miss Brown. "With more rumbling?"

"I should rather say with a purr. I am inclined to suppose some species of chariot. The Goblin King then withdrew to the house. In fact, he withdrew to this hall, and sat for a long time there in the window, quite still and silent. He appeared lost in sombre thought. When at last he stirred, it was because the dawn was breaking. He then began once more to explore the house. I felt that I had seen enough, and I slipped out to recover my dinghy. I was halfway across the lawn when I heard the laughter."

"The laughter?" Richard Poole was startled.

"It came from high in air, and I knew at once that it was supernatural. Very cautiously I skirted the house—and suddenly I saw the Goblin King again, silhouetted against the dawn. He had climbed the ruined stair—climbed right to the top—and now he was looking down on all that part of Water Poole that is mere ruin.

And he was laughing. I have never heard such laughter. It was, I say, supernatural—and yet all the gaiety and all the fun of the world we know seemed to be in it. I was astounded. I was strangely moved. Once more it pealed out—and then, quite abruptly, ceased. And the Goblin King had vanished.”

There was a long silence. At last Richard Poole spoke softly. “He had vanished?”

“Yes—following darkness. Following darkness like a dream. That was all.”

The silence renewed itself, until broken by Appleby. “Yes,” he said. “That—I am very glad indeed to say—was all.”

And Appleby and Judith drove away. He waited until they were on the highroad and then asked a question. “The doctor is quite sure?”

“Quite sure. It will be confirmed at the postmortem. Hiram Poole was dead before he reached the ground. He died of the heart failure that had threatened him for a long time.”

“That’s one way of putting it. Another is to say that he died of laughter. It was appropriate enough, for the whole affair was comedy. Once or twice it looked like crime—but it proved to be comedy in the end. One can’t consider that Richard Poole was very culpable, and he told the truth as he knew it. So did that tiresome but perfectly honest temperance crusader. . . . But of course there was more to it than that.”

“More to Hiram Poole’s death?” Judith nodded over the wheel. “Decidedly.”

“One can’t doubt that young Richard’s deception was something the discovery of which was very painful to him. Imagine him; sick and chill and tired, being haled around that derelict shrine—for it was that to him—in the small hours.”

“And by a Daughter of Abstinence, at that.”

“Quite. It must have been sheer nightmare. And any common man would simply have felt himself abominably cheated and betrayed.”

“Any common man would have suspected the very obvious mercenary motive.”

“Hiram had his dark hour, I don’t doubt, hunched there in a window of the hall. But he rose to the thing.”

“He rose to it.”

“That Pooles are still resourceful and gay. Hiram saw it like that, and his own laughter attested it. I take off my hat to him.”



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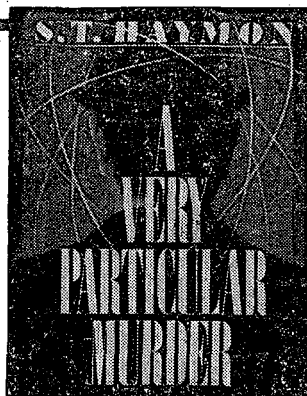
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# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



**D**etective Inspector Benjamin Jurnet strongly resembles a portrait of George Bullen, the Viscount Rochford, who was the brother of Anne Boleyn. They both have the black hair, long lean face, smoldering eyes, and prominent nose that impart an air of moody disdain to their appearances. These dark, exotic, almost Mediterranean good looks, however English they might in fact be, earn Jurnet a nickname from his fellow police—Valentino—a nickname of which he is well aware and which embarrasses him somewhat. In actual fact, Jurnet “never [sets] out consciously to charm underlings, who consequently, once they

[get] over his foreign appearance, [get] on well with him.”

Ben Jurnet is with the Norfolk CID. At the start of a case, he acts like “a bear with a sore head” due to a delicacy, a reluctance to intrude upon the privacy of others, an uncharitable shying away from other people’s troubles. The living always trouble him more than the dead during an investigation, and at a case’s conclusion, he “. . . always [needs] a little time to recover from the backwash of other people’s emotions.” His partner, Detective Sergeant Jack Ellers, seems to understand this quirk of Jurnet’s, and Ellers’ talents complement Jurnet’s on the cases they work on together.

Jurnet never eats—he has a habit, when preoccupied, of forgetting about food altogether and then, when reminded, becoming famished. Ellers is always inviting him home to eat with him and his wife, Rosie (Ellers *never* forgets to eat). And Jurnet's superintendent, a good man to work with, but whose relationship with Jurnet is spiced with a touch of mutual dislike, is constantly reminding him to go get something to eat. Jurnet usually refuses Ellers' offers and ignores the suggestion of his superior.

Instead, he returns to the brick box he calls home, which smells of slow-simmered underwear, Nappi-San and joss-sticks on the stairs. His fellow tenants—the O'Driscolls on the first floor, with their continual new kids, and Miss Whistler—figure peripherally in his drab, and limited, private life. He has done nothing with his flat, assuming that any attempts to remodel or decorate will be negated if and when Miriam consents to be his wife. He rarely spends time on a case.

S.T. Haymon's series consists of five books to date. *Death and the Pregnant Virgin* (St. Martin's, 1981; Bantam, 1984) concerns the murder of a young girl in a shrine to a medieval saint. In *Ritual Murder* (St. Martin's 1982), Jurnet investigates the

murder of a choirboy in a Norfolk cathedral. In *Stately Homicide* (St. Martin's, 1984), the corpse of a Hungarian hero is found in the moat of a stately home on an estate gotten up like a pre-Industrial Revolution village to attract tourists; it is this attraction which has drawn Jurnet there initially—he is buying a piece of handmade jewelry for Miriam. In *Death of a God* (St. Martin's, 1987), the lead singer of the rock group The Second Coming is found dead, tied to a cross in the marketplace of a village. Jurnet actually witnesses the death, by poisoning, of a Nobel Prize winner, a survivor of the death camps of WWII, at a conference of renowned physicists in *A Very Particular Murder* (St. Martin's, 1989, \$16.95, 224 pp); he had been assigned to security and ended up at the dead man's table.

Many of these books deal with some aspect of religion. Three (*Death of a Pregnant Virgin*, *Ritual Murder* and *Death of a God*) are concerned with various shrines, cathedrals, and trappings of religion, but all of the series is interwoven with Jurnet's religious conflict. In the course of his investigations in *Ritual Murder*, he discovers that there was a medieval Jurnet: Jurnet of Norwich, the Rothschild of the Middle Ages,



a Jewish man whose money built abbeys and cathedrals and financed crusades in the twelfth century. A witness in the case asks him if he is indeed related to this Jurnet. This becomes of particular interest to him, since Miriam, who is Jewish, wants him to convert before she will marry him.

He was raised as a Unitarian but does not consider himself a religious man. While he approves of religion as a whole, since, "if practiced in moderation . . . [it tends] to make people behave better than worse," he distrusts it when it is carried to an extreme. In *Ritual Murder* and in the later books, he is studying at a synagogue under Rabbi Leo Schnellman, but he had thought conversion would be faster than this! The rabbi will not pass on his studies without a sign of true commitment on Jurnet's part, and Jurnet is having difficulty finding this commitment. In fact, he is sorely tested when, in *A Very Particular Murder*, he has to go to Israel to talk to a witness. He finds that that place, and Jerusalem in particular, do not affect him as he was told they should. He keeps wishing he were back home in comfortable Norfolk. When he sees how changed is Miriam, who has been working on a kibbutz for

the handicapped, he begins to have doubts, not only about conversion. Perhaps *she* doesn't want him any more. . . .

The series is, basically, a British police procedural series, but the charm of the books is in the character study of Benjamin Jurnet. As the series progresses, it is enlightening to compare the Jurnet of *Ritual Murder* with the Jurnet of *A Very Particular Murder*. In *Ritual Murder*, he is a man of unquestioning love and dedication, which can be seen when an epitaph on a cathedral plaque catches his eye. This epitaph starts out with the phrase:

"Miriam my wyf,  
Joy of my lyf,"

a phrase that haunts him throughout the book. In *A Very Particular Murder*, he is afraid to announce his presence to Miriam when he sees her in Jerusalem. His intellectual and emotional conflicts regarding his love for Miriam and his as-of-yet unsuccessful conversion to Judaism provide a touching picture of a policeman with very human problems.

Haymon writes one of the more literate, well written series now being published, a series most highly recommended to those readers who like the British "cosy" as well as to the fans of the procedural.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



**T**ango & Cash dances around the story of a couple of hero cops who've become the victims of injustice and tries to cash in on the box office appeal of Sylvester Stallone and Kurt Russell. It is more successful at the latter.

While there is no doubt that this is a Hollywood action picture—it begins with the insistent beat of loud, funky, electronic music pounding away while Stallone finishes a highway chase by singlehandedly stopping a speeding tanker truck dead in its tracks—there are elements of a good police thriller here.

Stallone plays Ray Tango, a much-decorated L.A. narcotics cop who reads the *Wall Street Journal* for a good time and whose style of dress earns him the moniker "Armani with a badge." Russell plays the more down-and-dirty Gabriel Cash, also a top narcotics cop but one

who prefers ripped T-shirts and worn jeans.

When circumstances find the two at the same drug bust, their natural rivalry shines through. Each tells the other, "I hear you're the second-best cop in L.A."

The action is peppered with light-hearted banter between the two rivals, who are forced to work together for their common good. Some of it is funny, recalling the screwball comedies of the 1940's, but it's not enough to sustain an intelligent film.

Back at the drug bust, the duo come across a federal agent, dead—murdered—wired for sound. In bursts an army of live federal agents and armed police, tipped off by—who knows? And the fun begins.

Although Tango and Cash insist they've been set up, they cop a plea and are sent to prison. But instead of the cushy mini-

mum security camp they've agreed to in their deal, they're doublecrossed and wind up at some sort of fortress prison populated by hordes of angry inmates, many of whom they've personally put there through good police work.

It would not be too revealing to say that *Tango and Cash* manage to escape, although with much mayhem along the way, and spend the rest of the film trying to figure out, find, and punish the guys who framed them.

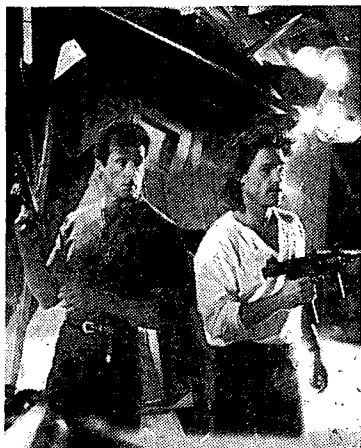
Sad to say for the mystery fan, the audience is already filled in on the identity of the bad old drug kingpin behind these sinister dealings. Veteran character actor Jack Palance has fun with his role as Yves Perret, narco-terrorist and

munitions dealer. With a nod to any number of Bond nemeses, he's headquartered in quite a bunker, surrounds himself with a couple of top-notch yes-men, and avails himself of the latest in technology. This villain, like the ones 007 comes up against, enjoys playing games with his enemies, in this case the two cops.

Also in the Bond vein is a friendly scientist, played by Michael J. Pollard, who heads the research and development team. He is happy to show off such crime-fighting inventions as an exploding dog and a heavily-armored, bullet-proof, space-age recreational vehicle.

The one real surprise in *Tango & Cash* involves Teri Hatcher, the only female role in this picture. She succeeds, for a while, as a diversion from the fast-paced, loud action.

Were this film more subtle, and less bang-bang shoot-em-up and revenge-oriented, it would actually make a decent crime drama. And if the dialogue between Stallone and Russell were to improve with more and better repartee, the adventures of these two cops might make an enjoyable long-running series. As it is, though, there's little doubt that the producers are looking to cash in on the Return of *Tango & Cash*, coming too soon to a theater near you.



Sylvester Stallone and Kurt Russell  
in *Tango & Cash*

# THE STORY THAT WON

The Winter Double Issue contest was won by Lola J. Florida. Honorable men-  
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Mysterious Photograph Schancer of Delray Beach, tions go to Frank Peirce of Don Shaffer of Belmont,

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## THE SANDS OF CRIME by Lola J. Schancer

---

Ann Carson shrieked with laughter at the photograph of her three aunts frantically searching the Sahara Desert for Grampa's vault key. "It's over three million square miles," she gasped, laughing until tears trickled down her cheeks. Laughing felt good after so much sadness.

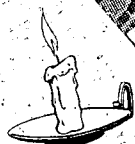
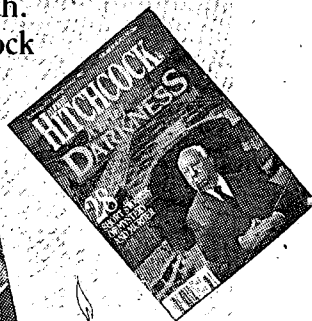
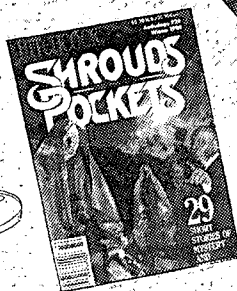
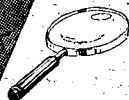
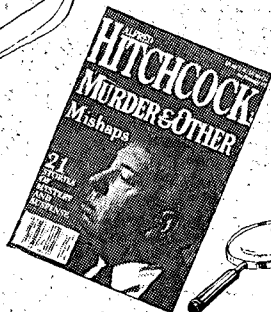
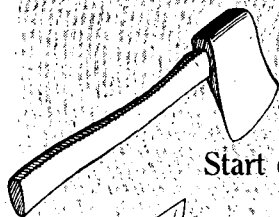
First Grandma, Sara Carson, died mysteriously, leaving the house devoid of her wonderful baking aromas. As Grampa's second wife she would have inherited everything, which infuriated the aunts. Convinced they had murdered her, Grampa spent all his time trying to prove it when he wasn't traveling. Then one night Grampa quietly joined Grandma.

In his will he claimed he found the proof, but would give the aunts a fighting chance since they *were* his children. If they located the key, they could destroy the evidence. If Ann found it, she must give it to the police. The only clue he gave was, "This is no laughing matter. Look in Sahara Dessert."

"The solution's in the words, not in the world's largest desert," Ann reasoned. "And he spelled 'desert' wrong—or did he?" she wondered. "What if he *meant* dessert? What dessert? Pie, ice cream?" Nothing meaningful came to her.

She read the clue for the hundredth time. "No laughing matter," she mused, and suddenly bolted upright. Removing the laugh, "ha" from "Sahara" left "Sara." And Ann knew the answer. Grandma's *cookie jar* had contained "Sara's Dessert,"—and that's where Ann found the key.

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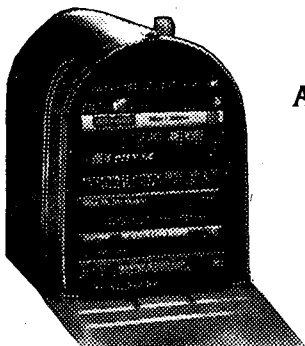
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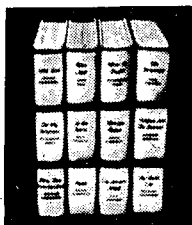
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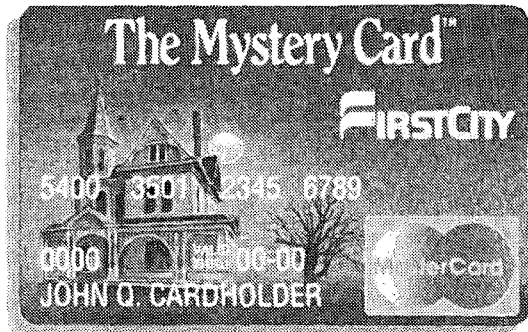
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